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THE DESPERADO, WATCHING FOR OTHER FOES, WAS UNCONSCIOUS THAT HOTSPUR HUGH WAS NEAR.

CHAPTER I.

THE CABIN BY THE RIVER.

It was a wild place, one the majority of men would have pronounced dangerous, for the river went shooting down the descent in a white mass, only broken by the black rocks which raised their heads above the surface.

It seemed a place to be avoided, yet a boat was coming down-stream and approaching the falls. It contained two men, one of whom wielded the oars. The second observed the falls and looked at the oarsman.

"Are you going down that place?" he asked.

"Why not? A stalwart young feller like you be ain't afraid, be you?" the oarsman asked.

His passenger shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon I can go where you can, honest man. Let the pot boil!"

If the pot did not boil the fall did, and they shot into it like a race-horse. Destruction seemed sure to meet the boat, but the two men never wavered. He at the oars used his blades with renewed skill and surveyed the descent with an eagle eye; the second man folded his arms and awaited the result with a cool, disdainful smile, which spoke well for his nerves.

But they were not to perish there, and the boat passed the last rock and shot out on tranquil water.

"Well done, honest man—what did you say was your name?"

"Brittles. I don't forget yourn so easy, Luke Bloodrod! That's a right odd name."

"It sounds so beside such a common one as Brittles," was the dry reply. "Honest man, you do not look at all brittle. But that's not to the point. How far to the Columbia?"

"A hundred yards, Mr. Bloodrod. When we turn ther point o' land, we're ther."

"You delight me, Brittles. And your cabin, you say, is also near?"

"We shall be there in half an hour, I reckon."

"Good! Row on, Brittles, and be sure of my thanks—and money."

The old, peculiar smile, which was half a sneer, crossed Luke Bloodrod's face. He was a peculiar man, anyway. Nature had dealt well with him. He had a splendid form, though not above the average weight. He seemed to combine the strength and suppleness of the panther, and would have made a bad enemy. His face, too, would have been good had it not been for a reckless, wild and half-sneering expression it bore. That he would risk his life with a careless laugh or jest was clear, just as it was clear that he would make a bad enemy. His strange smile bewildered the beholder, and set him to wondering whether Bloodrod was all man or part devil.

But the wisest of all wonderers would have to know the man before they knew his character; he was unreadable.

In point of age he was about thirty; was well but unostentatiously dressed; and had the air and aspect of a man of the world.

Boatman Brittles was a man of middle age and Bloodrod's opposite. Middle-aged, he was coarse, uneducated, ignorant, ill-dressed, ill-mannered, unshaven and unshorn, dirty and brutal-faced. He looked like a particularly cross-grained bulldog, and was a mere ruffian; that was clear in every feature.

It did not speak well for Bloodrod to be in such company, but he had never met the boatman until a few hours before. Such being the case, it did not speak well for his judgment to employ such a fellow. Yet, he sat in the boat, addressed Brittles as "Honest man," and smiled as coolly as though he knew his words to cover a fact rather than a probable fiction.

The boat rounded the wooded corner and floated out on the broader bosom of the Columbia, the noblest river of the Pacific slope. It sends a small ocean of water seaward, draining as it does hundreds upon hundreds of square miles of land. As the West is at present divided, the great river calls on Oregon, Washington Territory, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Nevada to swell the broad stream it carries westward.

But, at the time of which we write, many of the States named above were unthought of and unknown, and only a few struggling towns were to be found between the forty-second and fiftieth parallels. The Columbia had never been pressed by the keel of a steamer; the Indians held almost undisputed possession, if not control, of the region; the men of the Hudson Bay Fur Company were numerous and always watching with a jealous eye the movements of the "Bostons," as the Indians called the people from the Eastern United States.

Near the mouth of the Columbia was the settlement of Astoria, founded through the enterprise of one of New York's most celebrated merchant citizens. This was the place wildest known, though it was because of its history rather than its strength, for it was only a weak, insignificant settlement.

At that time it was no easy matter to reach Oregon. A journey around Cape Horn was long, and did not always prove successful as a voyage on the Pacific should. On the other hand, the only way by land was a long, weary, dangerous tramp through far-stretching miles of bleak country, inhabited only by Indians, who were thirsting for the blood of the white man.

Despite all these disadvantages, settlers were yearly growing more numerous along the Columbia. New towns sprung up, ever and anon, and though they grew very slowly, they were there, and the hardy pioneers were developing what has become the Oregon of to-day.

Religious people had done their share, too, and several "missions" had been established for the education and improvement of the Indians.

It would have been as well to try to reform some of the white men while they were about it. There were reckless and desperate men in the young territory, and frequent quarrels and fights took place. The nature of some of these feuds will be apparent as our story progresses.

Boatman Brittles did not row a great while after touching the Columbia, but, turning to the left, crossed the river and made for the southern bank.

"Do you see ther cabin back thar among the trees?" he asked.

"Yes."

"That's mine."

"Will your wife welcome us?"

"I reckon not. I ain't got none. My gal, Lona, keeps that place, an' she does what I sez."

"Lona? Quite a romantic name," said Bloodrod, carelessly.

"That's all ther romance thar is about it. Don't look fur more. I'm a plain man, mister, an' thar's naught about my home ter suit fine eyes like yourn. Don't look too much."

"Come, you are surly now, honest man. What do you take me to be—a pirate?"

"You're a man o' ther world, an' they is diff'rent from our people. Hyar we are simple in ways an' speech. You come from ther polished world, an' thar's no knowin' how you'll grade us. But we won't speak o' that, fur we are not hyar ez enemies. Let it drop. Jump ashore!"

Brittles had driven the boat to land, and when Bloodrod had stepped out, he landed and secured the craft to a sapling.

They then walked through a thin fringe of trees and the boatman's house was visible just before them. It was a long, low cabin of logs, and without one claim to beauty. Luke Bloodrod had seen houses just as humble made pleasant by their owners' good taste—by a running vine or otherwise—but he shrugged his shoulders as he saw this hovel of the wood.

"They are barbarians, all," he thought.

But he followed his sinister guide with a bold, free stride, indifferent to the fact that he might be going into a den of outlaws. Perhaps he was not well acquainted with the ways of Oregon.

The cabin door was closed, but Brittles flung it open, and crossed the threshold.

"Come in, stranger, come in; I give ye welcome, right hearty."

Bloodrod followed and then pulled off his hat as the boatman added:

"Stranger, my daughter, Lona, an' Brimstone Jake, a roarer. Set down, Bloodrod."

The latter had made good use of his eyes. He saw at one glance that the room had two occupants. One was a man who was like the boatman in that he was ragged, dirty and sinister-looking. This, of course, was Brimstone Jake.

But it was on Lona's face that Bloodrod's gaze lingered. He saw a queen where he expected to see a reproduction of Brittles. Lona was young and pretty. A wonderful face was hers. Regularly formed, finely colored and intelligent, she also had that soulful quality which few women and no men possess.

If Luke had come to scoff, he remained to admire, and it was to the queen of the cabin that he lifted his hat.

But the voice of Brimstone Jake broke in on his wandering thoughts most unpleasantly.

"Yas, set ye down, stranger. Ther cabin is large, an' ther more we be, ther merrier ther hours will go. Old man," to the boatman, "you're a baked brick, you are. How runs the river?"

"Strong, but rough," said Brittles.

"Will thar be rain?"

"Thar are clouds in the sky, an' when ther sign is out, ther rain is collectin'."

"I reckon we kin care fur it."

"Take car' o' yerself an' you'll do well, Jake. Change ther subject, and talk boss-sense."

CHAPTER II.

THE BOATMAN'S DAUGHTER.

LUKE BLOODROD had taken a chair, and his manner was cool and careless, but his eyes were never idle. They saw a good deal, while they seemed to see nothing. He saw that Brimstone Jake and Brittles looked at each other with meaning glances, and it dawned upon him that the last-recorded dialogue had a meaning not apparent on the surface.

If the men furnished an interesting study, it was more so with Lona. From the first she had seemed sorry to see Bloodrod; she had responded to his greeting only with a nod; and he saw that she looked at her father and Jake doubtfully.

Her eyes were of that peculiar kind into which people of discernment may look and see miles and miles away. Bloodrod, looking, saw the shadow of trouble there. If the boatman's passenger was in danger, he had not walked into it with closed eyes. He read Brittles's character, and he suspected that, while the two men were desperate fellows, Lona was not in the least in sympathy with them.

Perhaps he had run his precious head into what bade fair to be a fatal trouble, and she was sorry it was so. All this dawned upon Bloodrod's mind, but he leaned back in his chair and smiled as calmly as though he was among friends.

A man of wonderful nerve the stranger appeared to be.

Brittles put away his rifle, ordered Lona to prepare supper, and then sat down to entertain his guest. He assured the stranger that he had come to a fine country. Oregon had a future. Just then there were drawbacks, but she would outgrow them.

"What are the worst troubles?" Bloodrod asked.

"Ther Hudson Bay men. We Americans—or

Bostons, as the reds call us—stand poor show with the Injuns. We ain't got enough o' a knack o' handlin' them. Ther Britishers hev ther inside track."

"But do the Indians amount to much? Your neighbors are Chinooks, an' I understand they are harmless, as a rule."

"They are better than ther Molacks."

"The Molacks. What are they?"

"A village o' reds north o' ther river. They're diff'rent from ther Chinooks, an' o' a warlike nature, but no one knows jest what they be. A generation back they appeared hyar an' asked fur land o' ther Chinooks. They got it an' settled down. That's all white men know about them. Molack is Chinook fur 'Elk.' Perhaps they know more about their guests, but whites kin only guess that they're o' Shoshone blood. Sart'ly, they must hev come a long ways, fur they hev altogether diff'rent features an' ways than ther Chinooks. They've got more devil in 'em, an' are always puttin' ther Chinooks up ter mischief."

Brittles frowned and showed very clearly that he did not like the Molacks, but Bloodrod heard him with an unmoved face. Perhaps he thought that, as he was not a citizen of Oregon, it concerned him but little whether the Molacks were of a warlike nature, or, like the Chinooks, peaceful.

Conversation continued until supper was ready. The three men then ate together. Lona did not sit down, and Bloodrod saw her eat nothing. Once or twice Brimstone Jake addressed her, but she was nearly as silent as though she had no tongue.

Now and then Bloodrod caught her gaze, and it seemed to him there was a mute warning in her eyes, but they were quickly averted, and she plainly shunned notice.

When the table was cleared she went outside, and Bloodrod soon followed. He suspected one or both the men would insist on accompanying him, so he could not speak with her alone, but their willing air, when he spoke of going, impressed him with the belief that they wanted to get rid of him. Perhaps they had that to say they did not want him to hear.

When he had passed the door he hesitated for a moment, looking toward the point where he had seen Lona disappear in the bushes and then back at the cabin.

Despite the careless air he at all times assumed, he was in Oregon with a fixed purpose, and he knew the man Brittles to be a rascal. He had not happened on him by chance, as the boatman thought, but by careful management, and he was working him the best he could.

There was a strong temptation to try to listen to what the men would say when he was not present, but he was not only satisfied that they would take measures to avoid having an eavesdropper at hand, but he wished to speak with the silent queen of the cabin.

So he followed after Lona as rapidly as he thought prudent. He did not wish to arouse suspicion.

He had expected some trouble about finding her, but as he entered the wood he heard voices, and looking through the bushes saw her dress waving not far away.

"And she's not alone," said he, thoughtfully. "Now then, who is there? How many of the honest man's amiable cut-throat friends are hanging around? I'll go slow and see who is there."

He made a slight *detour* and advanced toward the two with care, which saved him from discovery. He knew enough of the crowd which circled around Brittles not to hesitate even at spying on a girl, and he came around with the skill of a veteran.

He saw Lona and a slender, dark-complexioned man, who was talking with her with an animation she did not reciprocate. Face and form and manner all spoke plainly to Bloodrod, who shrugged his shoulders again.

"By the pricking of my thumbs, I'll swear this is a Frenchman," he said. "Well, it's to be expected. Still, I don't believe he is the girl's friend. No; he smiles always, but her face is dark and defiant, and it would not surprise me if she struck him yet. She has the spirit, and he looks like a first-class cut throat. One of the Hudson Bay men, of course, who labors under the belief that the whole earth was intended for the Frenchman."

The speaker looked carefully about, and then, marking his way well, advanced so near that he could overhear what was being said.

"It does not do you credit, my dear Lona," the man was remarking, "to conduct yourself as you do. Is woman's heart always hard, or are you worse than the average? *Mon cher ami*, do you forget the days of yore?"

"Forget them!" echoed the girl, in a deep voice; "I only wish I could forget them."

"And me, too?"

"And you, too."

"Unhappy wretch that I am, I am plunged in despair by what you say!" cried the man, but there was a mocking inflection in his voice.

"Basil St. Cyr, why do you keep on the mask when it is so thin? I know your heart is like that of a tiger; I know you are my bitter enemy—"

"Never, Mademoiselle Lona; I swear you mistake me. *Mon Dieu*, I am a Frenchman, and they are never unjust to women!"

"Sir, did I not tell you I remembered the past?" the girl bitterly cried.

"You did, and so do I remember. I do not forget that once a certain young lady pressed her lips to mine, and clasped her arms about my neck. She was named Lona Mulligan, and was—yourself!"

"Fool that I was!" she interjected.

"Ah, no; love is never folly, and your bright eyes—"

"Enough, Basil St. Cyr. Your taunts do not cut as deeply as you think, and as you can have no other motive for uttering them, we may as well meet on plain footing. We understand each other, and I need no further testimony to convince me you are a villain. It is but a day, as I may say, when I was at the school in Montreal. I am scarcely the Lona Mulligan of that time, however. Your misdeeds tempered the untried steel, and I am more world-wise than then. I know you well."

"*Mon Dieu*, will you give me no chance to speak?" he cried. "Truly, you lash me as though I were a cur. Do not forget our mutual worldly positions. I am a descendant of one of the noblest families in France; I am a soldier; and I am an officer honored by the Hudson Bay Company. Among them I am called Captain St. Cyr. You—well, I know not what to say, upon my soul. You are the daughter of one Jake Mulligan, who lives by selling whisky to the deluded red devils. A high and lofty profession, upon my soul—a whisky-trader. And you are his daughter!"

The Frenchman broke into a light, scornful laugh, but Lona heard him without a change of face.

"And you, the Honorable Captain St. Cyr, are his ally and friend," she retorted.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Well?"

"You should not speak so scornfully of your ally."

"What can I do? I am an employee of the Hudson Bay Company, and a Frenchman always works for the interests of his employers. Monsieur Jake Mulligan is useful to the company; hence, I am his friend."

"This is a hot-bed of crime," said the girl, bitterly. "I wish I knew all that you and Brimstone Jake, and my wretched father, are trying to do. I am sure it is nothing to your credit."

"What would you do if you knew?"

"Who knows? I don't."

St. Cyr clasped her wrist in his hand, which was almost as slender as hers, though his wrist betokened enough muscular power.

"Would you betray us, mademoiselle? Think twice before you do it. Jake Mulligan is a brute, and I care nothing for him, but I am a St. Cyr, and my neck is precious. Beware how you place it in jeopardy. Be so good as to remember the hold I have upon you. Raise a hand against me and I will crush you!"

CHAPTER III.

BLOODROD RECEIVES WARNING.

ST. CYR'S manner had completely changed. He was no longer a mocking devil, but his voice had grown hard and tense, and he looked into the girl's eyes in an evil way. She had struggled at first in his grasp, but when she saw how futile were her efforts she stood still, a proud, disdainful look on her face.

"You are manly to threaten a woman," she said.

"I am manly enough to look out for my precious self," replied the Frenchman. "*Mon Dieu*, why not? Am I a stick or stone? Can I forget, even in this barbarous country, that I am a St. Cyr? Pah! my life is worth as much as a score of these common fellows who range along the Columbia."

Luke Bloodrod, standing behind his back, heard all without a change of face, but his mind was active. He had never seen Captain St. Cyr before that day, but he already hated the man. He was egotistical and cruel, and the spy would have taken pleasure in throttling him then and there.

The time, however, was not ripe. Bloodrod was at the Columbia with a fixed purpose, and he intended to work slowly and carefully. Basil St. Cyr clearly needed attention, but the time would come later.

"Who is at the house?" the captain abruptly added.

"Father, Brimstone Jake and another man."

"Another man? Who is he?"

"I don't know."

"Is he one of our sort?"

"He is a stranger to me. Go there if you want to know more. I am not your spy."

"You are decidedly cranky, my fair Lona, but there is sense in what you say. My eyes will soon read him, and I go. Farewell, my darling, and may angels guard you—their sister in the flesh."

He lifted his hat mockingly, laughed and strode away. Lona Mulligan ground her heel into the earth and looked after him as though she would gladly have struck him down in his tracks. But

she stood still, and as St. Cyr went on toward the cabin, Bloodrod made a *detour* and again approached the girl.

She was so absorbed in thought that she did not hear his approach until he purposely stepped on a dry stick. Then she turned quickly. He expected to see some sign of confusion or alarm, but there was none. She glanced quickly around.

"Where are the others?" she asked.

"I do not know. I am here alone, and—"

"I wish to speak with you," interrupted the girl, uttering the exact words which were on his own lips. "Do you know the sort of people you are among?"

Bloodrod looked at her closely.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"My father told you his name was Brittles. It is nothing of the sort. If you have been in Oregon any length of time you must have heard of Jake Mulligan, the whisky-trader. Father is he."

"I have heard of him, but seldom to his credit," Bloodrod dryly observed.

"I can readily believe you. I, too, know his reputation. The men at Astoria, and nearly all other Americans, condemn him because he sells liquor to the Indians, and may be sowing the seed of future trouble, but the Hudson Bay men uphold him. Doubtless they scorn him as much as any one, but they will uphold whomsoever the 'Bostons' condemn."

Lona spoke with an air of bitter meditation, and did not seem conscious that she was speaking aloud. Bloodrod waited impatiently for her to finish.

"Who and what is this Basil St. Cyr?" he asked. "I know he is employed by the British fur company, and that they call him captain. But what business has he with Jake Mulligan?"

The girl unclosed her lips as though to speak impulsively, and then closed them again. When she did speak, it was calmly and carefully.

"How should I know?" she asked. "I try to know as little of my father's business as possible, and what I do learn I can scarcely tell to strangers. One thing I will say, however: the sooner you are gone from this vicinity, the better it will be for you. Go to the river, unloose the smallest boat—it is mine, and I give it to you—and row west as fast as you can. If you are a fair oarsman, two hours' work will take you to the New England Mission. There you will be safe, and Astoria is not far beyond."

"Stay, Miss Mulligan," he interrupted. "At this rate you will soon have me in San Francisco, or *en route* around the Horn. I am not in such haste. Later, I may visit Astoria and the Mission, but, at present, my steps don't bend that way. Why should I leave here? Mr. Mulligan expects me to stay, and I would not disappoint the honest man."

"Have you no regard for your life?"

Bloodrod raised his shoulders.

"I love it well."

"Then take care of it."

"Is it in danger here?"

"Yes."

"From whom?"

The girl stamped impatiently on the ground.

"Am I a bureau of information?" she asked. "Let it suffice that I tell you to go. I speak for your good."

"Speak plainly then. Is it to Mulligan and St. Cyr I must look for the danger? Why should they seek to do me mischief?"

"Ask them if you must know," she curtly replied; "but do not ask unless you are tired of life. I have warned you and I shall tell you no more. This place is one of danger, which may prove fatal to you. There flows the Columbia—go!"

She pointed toward the West, but Bloodrod looked not toward the setting sun. His gaze was on her face.

"Miss Mulligan," he said, more earnestly than he had spoken before, "I beg that you will speak plainly. Until to-day I never saw you, and I confess I was surprised to find that Jake Mulligan had such a daughter. But I am also glad. I see that you are very different from the rough and lawless fellows among whom your relationship to your father has thrown you. More than this, I believe I see in you real honor and womanly tenderness of heart—"

She interrupted with a bitter laugh.

"Don't be too sure of it."

"Do you object to being thought so?"

"Sir," she replied, "I object to a waste of words. Why do you stay when I have warned you? You had better by far be looking to your safety than talking idly with Jake Mulligan's daughter."

"Jake Mulligan's daughter is capable of better things and I would have her know it. Come, cast off your allegiance to this man, whom you neither love or esteem, and win the lasting gratitude of those who do not think as he does."

"Did those who sent you here ask you to prevail on a daughter to betray her father?"

There was a womanly dignity about her manner which confused Bloodrod for a moment, though he could not feel that it was dishonorable to betray such a parent as the whisky-trader.

"How do you know any one sent me?" he asked.

"I know it well."

"Why am I sent?"

"Ask the superintendent of the New England Mission," was the retort, half-scornful, half-bitter.

"He would probably say that Jake Mulligan is selling liquor to the Indians at a rate which makes one wonder how all the stuff is conveyed to Oregon. He might intimate that some of it is made here; that there is a secret distillery; but that Oregon is broad, and that 'tis not easy to find it. If any one would tell all this, they would help the Indians, and civilization, and win honorable friends."

He looked fixedly at the girl, but her face moved in a scornful smile.

"Sir, you misunderstand me," she said. "I have warned you that your life is in danger, but that is all I can, or will, do. You have shown your hand plainly. You are no ignorant traveler who has come to Oregon by chance, but an agent of men avowedly my father's enemies. I will not help you. Jake Mulligan may be a brutal, dishonest man, but he is my father. I will not betray him!"

Bloodrod still looked at her attentively. Perhaps one could have found a grain of admiration in his expression, but it showed chiefly his inflexible nature which would not allow him to turn from an object until it was accomplished or all hope lost.

"Help me in this, and I will help you against Basil St. Cyr," he said.

Lona started abruptly, showing a confusion which was almost dismay. Her eyes were like a frightened fawn's.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I need not explain. You have not forgotten that old epoch in your life, or, if you have, St. Cyr has not."

He was going at random, for he had no idea what was the nature of the secret he had touched, but he knew by her expression it was one of importance.

"Do you mean that you will use this secret as a means of making me speak plainly in regard to my father?" she tersely demanded.

Bloodrod put out a deprecating hand.

"Heaven forbid! When I use any such power to persecute a woman, may this hand wither by my side. No; what I said, and what I meant, was this: Help me against certain parties here, and I will defend you against St. Cyr."

Lona leaned against a tree and looked at him with a deep shadow in her deeper eyes.

"Tell me plainly what you know of St. Cyr," she said.

"Enough so that I promise to be your friend and his enemy."

"I do not want a friend whom I must purchase. Enough, sir; you may mean well; I am inclined to think you do; but I cannot make any bargain with you. Let us drop the subject. I am going back to the house, for it would not be wise for me to be seen talking with you."

Bloodrod saw that it was impossible to move her, and he stepped aside with a courteous gesture to indicate that he acquiesced in her decision; but, as he did so, the bushes parted and a man sprung at him with an uplifted knife.

It needed no lengthy survey to tell that Bloodrod's life was sought, but it was not so easily taken. He leaped lightly to one side, and, as his assailant came within reach of his hand, caught him by the shoulder and forced him to his knees.

He held a brutal-looking Indian.

"There you are," he said, "and I think a few apologies will come in handy."

But Lona looked frightened in the extreme.

"It is Whisky John!" she exclaimed. "Let him go, or—"

She paused as the sound of footsteps reached her ears, and, turning, both she and Bloodrod saw Jake Mulligan, alias Brittles, and St. Cyr approaching. And the look of alarm increased on Lona's face.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSION.

NEAR the bank of the Columbia, and half-way from Jake Mulligan's cabin to Astoria, stood a small collection of human dwellings. All were made of logs, all were of the most unpretentious type, and, with one exception all were small.

Look at the place whenever one would, he would see Indian children of all ages about the cabins; perhaps not numerously, for there were times when one or two would comprise the visible total, yet they were there.

Despite this fact, it was not an Indian village. It was the New England Mission.

When the eyes of the East were first turned on Oregon, philanthropic and religious people saw there a field for usefulness, and the result was several "Missions" along the Columbia. They were for the benefit of the Indians, who were there taught as circumstances allowed, and given a worldly and spiritual education such as could be instilled into their darkened minds.

These Missions, however, were beset with unexpected troubles. Sickness, disease and death were their worst enemies, for the health of the Indians was not good, and the number of their pupils was always uncertain, variable and few.

The superintendent of the New England Mission was a man named Rufus Just, a name very appropriate to his nature, for he intended to use all men well. His was a discouraging position. The white population of Oregon was scanty and scattered, assistants were not easily obtained, and those who did come to help him often contracted and succumbed to the diseases prevalent among the Indians.

Out under a group of majestic forest trees was a line of rude slabs which marked the last resting-place of those who had died inside the walls of the New England Mission, their teaching days forever past.

It was only a break in the forest which came down to each bank of the Columbia like soldiers densely massed, and many would have said it was the dreariest place to be found for many miles around, yet, three of the Mission teachers were women, and one had not seen her twenty-fifth year.

It is to this young woman we will now give our attention, as she sits at the foot of a huge tree just beyond the clearing, with one of her pupils by her side.

Isabel Gray, the teacher was called. She was a quiet, modest, reserved little woman, and one would never have given her credit for the bravery necessary to exile herself from the world and live in that wild place; yet she was the only one of Mr. Just's assistants whom he had never heard say she wished she was back in the East.

At times the superintendent had wondered if she had not seen some sorrow in the past which had driven her to this life. Young people are not accustomed to forsake the bright, attractive world through mere philanthropy; there is usually a heart history in the case, if the world but knew it; and Miss Gray had an air of sadness which increased Mr. Just's belief.

Still, he said nothing to her.

On this occasion, the teacher's companion was an Indian girl of about twelve years. She was not a beauty, nor was beauty a characteristic of her race, the Chinooks. Yet, the child was bright beyond the average; she had been able to speak some English when the Mission was established, and under later training had learned rapidly.

Between her and Miss Gray a strong bond of sympathy had sprung up, and they were always together when it was possible. The father of Blue Jay, as the Chinook maiden was called, was a miserable vagabond known as "Whisky John," and it was a relief to her to get away from him.

While these strange friends sat there, there was a sound of footsteps and an old Indian woman, a pensioner of the Mission, advanced followed by a stranger. The latter was somewhat behind, and the old woman had time to explain that none of the other "Bostons" were to be found, before he arrived.

Miss Gray arose to receive him, but as he stepped around the tree and her gaze rested on his face, all her usual calm self-possession deserted her and she recoiled as though she beheld a serpent.

She had seen that dark, smooth, plausible face before, and she knew the bland smile with which he regarded her was but a mask over a cruel and remorseless heart. It was a dismal surprise. She had not thought to see him there; she had hoped never to see him again; and she stared at him as though fascinated.

On his part there was no surprise, and she knew he must have known of her presence. Even he could not hide all surprise if he came upon her unexpectedly, for there was a drama in the past which concerned both intimately.

He removed his hat and, holding it in one hand, advanced, still smiling blandly.

"You are Miss Gray, of the Mission, the Indian woman tells me," he said, smoothly. "I found Mr. Just and all the others out, so I came here. My name is Obed Leechcomb, and I am the agent of the Colonization Society. You may have heard of a change."

Isabel had heard of it, but she had not recognized in the name of Leechcomb the plausible scoundrel she had known in the past.

While listening her mind was busy. She did not wish to have her bitter past uncovered, and as the agent showed a disposition to ignore their acquaintance, she was not in the least inclined to claim it.

"Mr. Just will soon be here," she stammered.

"I am in no haste," he said, still smiling blandly. "I am pleased with your oasis in the wood, and I am sure time will not drag."

"Will you—a—wait at the Mission?"

"No, thank you, I will remain here and talk about the Mission. Are you progressing well?"

He asked the question as earnestly as though his whole life was bound up in the success of the Mission, but Miss Gray could not so easily command herself. Merciful Heaven! what unfortunate chance had brought her once more in contact with the worst enemy she had in the world? This man had once ground her heart

into the dust, and that she had survived it so well was owing to her strong nature. She had fled from the place where she knew him and sought in wild, unsettled Oregon to bury her secret and herself.

What evil wind had sent him there? a place where he was as little to be expected as at the North Pole.

She was conscious that Blue Jay, the Indian girl, was looking at her curiously, for the child had unusual powers of discernment, so she rallied as far as was possible and replied to Mr. Leechcomb. He seemed to have but one anxiety in the world—the good of the New England Mission.

It was a great relief when footsteps announced the coming of another person, and Rufus Just, tall, slender, white-haired and patriarchal, appeared. He was to her a combination of father and pastor, and she felt her blood flow freely once more.

The superintendent was glad to see Leechcomb. He was a prominent sharer in the task undertaken by Just, and, little suspecting the manner of man he was entertaining, he welcomed him gladly and invited him to go to the Mission.

Leechcomb looked back at Isabel, smiling like a Mephistopheles.

"Does Miss Gray accompany us?" he asked.

"Not now!" she said, abruptly. "I am busy; I—I have other duties. I will come later."

"We shall all meet at the supper-table," said Mr. Just, smiling kindly. "None of us forget that occasion."

"I trust Miss Gray will not do so to-night."

It seemed to be a courteous remark on Leechcomb's part, but it was secretly accompanied by a look Isabel well understood; a menacing look which warned her not to forget.

And then she looked after them as they walked away arm in arm, almost wondering why a just Providence did not strike down the man who masqueraded under a fair guise only to work his dark schemes.

"It is better that one of us were dead this minute!" she thought, her eyes growing dusky with emotion.

A hand touched her own, and she looked down and saw the troubled face of Blue Jay.

"Sister," said the child, "what is wrong?"

They were simple words, each one of which had been taught her, but the earnestness she used was her own.

Isabel's hand fell lightly on the dusky head.

"What do you mean, Nellie?" she asked.

"The man is evil, and sister fears him," said the Chinook, positively.

"Hush! He is a man honored by my people."

"That may be, but his heart is evil. Blue Jay can read it in his face. More than that, sister has seen him some time before, and she fears him now. What has he done? Tell Blue Jay. There are times when her heart is heavy, and she can feel for sister. Blue Jay knows what fear is. She has a father, whom white men call Whisky John. When he goes to the cabin of Jake Mulligan he comes home with his heart hard and his hand heavy. Then I fear him and have to run away and hide. Sister looks as though she would like to hide, too."

This childish analysis of the situation was more to the point than a maturer one might have been, but as Isabel did not wish to talk of her own case, she sought to avoid it.

"And what of Hugh?" she asked. "Is he afraid?"

"Hugh is here—who speaks his name?" cried a new voice, and a light, boyish figure bounded into view, turned a hand-spring, and then folding his hands, stood up before the Mission teacher as tall and straight, if not as muscular, as though he were Pontiac returned to life.

CHAPTER V.

STRIKING EAGLE.

THE new-comer was a most remarkable person. He was an Indian boy of about seventeen years, but as different from most of his race, as represented by the Chinooks, as could be imagined.

He was tall, slender, supple, graceful and strong, while his features, though brown, were far more regular than those of most Indians. His hair, too, was less coarse than the average; his features more intelligent, and in every way he was a strange creation for the forest of the Columbia.

Like Nellie, alias Blue Jay, he was a child of Whisky John, the degraded Chinook, but he was not a "chip of the old block."

In his native tongue his name was Striking Eagle, and so he often called himself, but the people of the Mission had given him the name of Hugh. To this his nature had served to prefix the sobriquet of "Hotspur," and as such he was known all the way from Shoal-water Bay to the Cascades.

He united the wild, restless, warlike spirit of the most valiant of his race to a sort of monkeyish spirit of mirth and mischief, and it was no strange thing for people, alarmed by hearing a ringing war-whoop above their heads when traversing the forest, to look up and see Hotspur Hugh swinging by one foot from a limb

sixty feet above the ground. It looked to be a dizzy height, but the Indian boy could go almost anywhere that the squirrels could.

Such was the person who suddenly appeared before Isabel and Blue Jay, and all that surprised the teacher was that he did not announce himself by a war-whoop.

She smiled faintly.

"Have you again honored us with your presence?" she asked.

"You see I am here," said Hotspur, a little puzzled by her mode of speaking.

"And I hope you have come to say you will enter our school," she continued.

He laughed loudly. The New England Mission had made some headway, but it had never been able to enroll the wayward youth among its pupils. He freely proclaimed himself "the white man's friend," and he had associated with him enough to learn his tongue; but he would not agree to be hived up in the Mission school-room.

To him freedom was everything.

"Schools are for her," he said, pointing to his sister. "Let women learn of the pale-faces if they will; I am a warrior."

He threw back his head, expanded his chest, and looked the miniature of what he claimed to be. Isabel shivered.

"Do not talk like that!" she exclaimed. "Forget such ideas, tame your wild spirit, attend the Mission school and become a good and wise man—"

The wayward youth laid one hand on her arm.

"Sister," he said, "when the eagle sings like your canary, or the canary goes out and becomes the king of the air, or you paint and fight like an Indian brave, then will I come to your school, where squaws and children are. Sister, your heart is good, and you speak gently to me and are kind to Blue Jay—the children of 'Whisky John'—and I would gladly please you if I could, but a warrior's school is the wood and the trail, and my blood is warm. We cannot be alike, but we are friends, and so we will remain."

All this had been earnestly said, but at the conclusion the reckless expression returned to his face and he shot away toward the river. A little later they saw him push from the bank in a bark canoe and paddle up stream.

Isabel sighed, but it was not because she considered him all bad by any means. He had a nature which scorned deceit or meanness; he was simply untamable. When the Mission people, seeing the miserable condition to which "Whisky John's" love for the flowing bowl reduced his children, rescued Blue Jay from suffering and darkness, they had tried to do as much for Hotspur Hugh.

They might as well have tried to tame the lightning which leaped along the edge of the black thunder-cloud. Striking Eagle always declared that missions and schools were for women, not for warriors.

He seldom appeared at the Mission, but he ranged all along the Columbia, appearing when and where least expected. From this he had obtained the sobriquet of the Will-o'-the-Wisp, and well did it seem suited to him.

Isabel often talked with Nellie about her brother, but on this occasion she had other food for thought, and the child, looking at her attentively, read her mood and said nothing, but the clasp of her hand was close and sympathetic.

Miss Gray was reluctantly returning to the Mission, and at the edge of the wood she bent, took the Chinook maiden in her arms and kissed her affectionately.

"You are going home now, Nellie?"

"Yes, sister."

"Then—good-by!"

The child's eyes suddenly grew moist.

"Sister, what is wrong?" she earnestly asked.

"Nothing—nothing," was the hurried reply.

"Your heart is sad, and there are tears in your voice. What has the bad man at the Mission to do with it? You never bade me good-by in such a way before—Are you going away, sister?"

Isabel again started. She had unconsciously betrayed herself by the fervor with which she kissed her favorite, but she had not expected such discernment on her part.

Going away? Yes, she intended that kiss for one of farewell—a long, last farewell. She intended to go away; to leave the Mission; to make one more effort to disappear from the knowledge of those who knew her. At all events, she must go where she would see Obed Leechcomb no more.

At the very outset she was beset by trouble, for she could not lie to the Indian girl, who thought her the personification of all that was good, but she made a partially successful effort to laugh away Nellie's fears, and, when she had left her, went secretly to her room at the Mission.

There was no irresolution on her part. With hasty fingers she collected her most necessary articles in a small package, and was ready for flight!

She had but a vague idea of what she would do, but she intended to reach Astoria and seize the first chance to take a vessel for San Francis-

co. There was no regular line, however, and she might have to wait for weeks.

When her preparations were completed she sat down at the window and looked out. She saw the usual scenes of the Mission. Half a dozen Indian children were playing in a group; an almost hideous Indian mother was caring for a babe which Mr. Just had lately doctored through some Columbia complaint, and at the same time talking with a blind crone who claimed to be a score of years past one hundred.

All these were the pensioners of the Mission.

Again, Isabel arranged her hair and prepared to descend to the common room. The supper hour was at hand, and to remain away would arouse general wonder. No, she must go and meet Obed Leechcomb, but she hoped the meeting would be their last.

He was with Just when she entered, and he had never talked more sanctimoniously. He was speaking of the Oregon missions, and the progress of education and religion, and he seemed full of zeal and piety.

Isabel was welcomed by both men. Just's smile was as kindly and noble as ever, while Leechcomb was like the serpent in Eden. He seemed to study her, and addressed so much of his conversation to her that she lost all appetite for supper, much to the alarm of Mr. Just, who feared another patient would be added to those in the Mission hospital, but not once did the man refer to the past.

But, after supper, while the superintendent was busy, he intercepted the girl as she was leaving the room.

"What now?" he sternly asked.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"You are thinking of running away!"

This blunt expression of her purpose made the teacher start violently. Was this man a possessor of knowledge from an unnatural and infernal source that he could thus read her thoughts?

"I—I did not—Why should you think that?" she stammered, when she could speak at all.

"I know your way" was the cold reply. "I have been watching you ever since I came, and I readily perceived your purpose. You must change it."

"What do you mean?"

"You must remain at the Mission."

"What do you care where I am?"

"I care enough so that you will remain here. Your notion for running away must not again be indulged in. When I want you, I want to know where to find you, and the New England Mission is an excellent place. Do you swear to remain?"

"No; I will make no promises," she said, with a gleam of latent courage.

"Wrong—you will!"

She looked at him half-defiantly, half in despair, but did not answer.

"Unless you solemnly promise, I will go to Mr. Just at once and tell all," he continued.

Her head dropped hopelessly.

"Your history is one you will not care to have published to the whole world," the cold, remorseless voice resumed, "and though the Oregon world is not a large one, I fancy that when I say 'Be silent!' you will meekly bow to my will."

CHAPTER VI.

THE WOUNDED MAN.

LEECHCOMB seemed like the statue of a Puritan endowed with a little life—just a little. One hand caressed his smooth-shaven chin, and the cold, gray eyes followed each change of Isabel's face, but that cold, severe face was as expressionless as though the statue was mounted on a pedestal for the admiration of the multitude.

Isabel had little to say. She had tested the man in the past and knew he was without mercy. When he had an object, he accomplished it if possible; and if human hearts were ground into the earth under his iron heel it made no difference.

The promise he exacted was given; the teacher agreed not to leave the Mission; and then, as Mr. Just returned, the old, bland smile reappeared on Leechcomb's lips, and the statue became a saint.

The two men talked about the state of affairs along the Columbia. Eastern people were doing what they could to settle the new territory, and to improve the Indians, but the Hudson Bay men looked with a jealous eye on their advancement and placed many obstacles in the way.

This great monopoly can never be fully understood except by those who had experience with it, but the history of our country will never fail to mention the "Hudson Bay Fur Company," nor to tell of its efforts to keep the Americans from sharing in the profits of the vast trade so long wholly their own.

Mr. Just complained that one Basil St. Cyr, an agent of the company, had made himself obnoxious by an over-supply of zeal and a lack of honor. Another drawback was the introduction of liquor, for which one Jake Mulligan was chiefly responsible.

To all these well-known details Isabel listened

without comprehending their import, and she was glad when Leechcomb succumbed to fatigue and announced that he would retire.

The superintendent showed him to his room, and then rejoined Miss Gray, and they talked of the day's progress at the Mission. An Indian boy of eleven had announced that he wished to obey the white man's God; Mother Molly, a Chinook of five-score years, had still further lost her power of vision; one of the other children was very sick with fever, and there were rumors of small-pox at Shoal-water Bay.

It was the old routine in which Isabel had for weeks past forced herself to be interested; but it was only with difficulty she now kept her mind on the subject. What was the New England Mission to her when Obed Leechcomb was there to grind her into the dust?

There was a rap at the door. Mr. Just opened it and saw one of the old squaws.

"Striking Eagle—down at river—wounded man," she mumbled, in broken English.

It was enough. Rufus Just was never deaf to the troubles of others, and whether the "wounded man" was red, white, black or yellow, the Mission was the place for him. Two of the male pensioners were enlisted, and all went to the river's bank together.

On the land's edge sat Hotspur Hugh, calm and dignified. Beside him rocked his canoe, and as the rescuers came up, he pointed with one finger:

"He needs the surgeon or the grave-digger; I am not sure which."

"What has happened, Hugh?" the superintendent quickly asked.

"Suicide, murder or accident. Who can tell which? The shooter can, but who was the shooter? That's it; pick him up with care."

They had gone forward and found a white man prostrate in the bottom of the craft. His eyes were closed and he breathed heavily, and a touch was sufficient to show that he was unconscious. A cursory examination satisfied Just that he was a stranger in the vicinity, and he asked Hotspur where he had been found.

What he knew was simply told. He had found him lying insensible by the river-bank, a mile above, and bleeding from a pistol wound in the side. He had at once brought him down in his canoe. That was all he knew.

The superintendent lost little time, but had him carried to the Mission and laid upon a bed.

He was a young man—possibly he had seen twenty-five years—and a model of physical and facial manliness. His dress was a hunting-suit, but Mr. Just noticed that his garments were of fine texture, and he suspected he was more than the ordinary Oregon rover.

The wound in his side was dressed. It was by no means severe, and Just, looking for another cause for his insensibility, found that he had a bruise on his head, which had evidently been made by a heavy blow.

Unless this blow had fractured his skull, or injured the brain, the unknown was in no danger, but his protracted unconsciousness rather troubled Mr. Just.

When he had done all he could he left the room and asked Isabel to watch over the wounded man while he put the place to rights for the night. Hotspur had already departed, rejecting Isabel's offer of shelter, but Just made it a point to see personally to all his pensioners.

The girl went to her new duty without any emotion whatever. Since coming to the Mission she had had all kinds of patients—the Mission, in fact, was more of a hospital than a school—and this man would only make one more.

She entered the sick-room and the watcher, an old Indian, at once hobbled away.

A light sitting on a rude table showed the wounded man, and she advanced to look at him with professional eyes. Then it was that the second surprise of the evening came to her. She looked once at the stranger, and then she reeled back, clasping her hand to her heart, and her face grew almost as white as the one on the pillow.

"Merciful Heaven!" she gasped.

Then followed a pause. The wounded man lay motionless, breathing heavily, and his closed eyes saw nothing of the scene before him. But Isabel Gray, with one hand over her heart and the other upon the table as a support, looked at him as though she saw a specter.

"He here?" she murmured, at last, through ashen lips. "Is the grave of the past giving up all its dead?"

Upon a shelf a clock ticked steadily, and its notes were like the tolling of a bell to her. She had received a shock she would not soon forget. She had known this manly young hunter in the past, and known him more than passing well.

Now she aroused, glanced around and then touched one of his hands. There was no responsive motion, but the contact thrilled her, and after another glance she started forward and bent over him as though to press her lips to his.

Even in the act, however, she recoiled, and then covered her eyes with her hands as though to shut out temptation. She sat down by the table, and, not once venturing to look at him, awaited Mr. Just's return.

He came at last, never suspecting her emotion, made another examination in which he decided

that the wounded man had received no severe injury and would soon recover.

Isabel asked permission to watch with him until midnight, and as the venerable superintendent was weary and sleepy, he did not refuse the request. He looked a little surprised, however, when Isabel asked him not to mention the hunter in any way to Obed Leechcomb.

"Not mention him to Leechcomb?" he repeated. "And why not, pray?"

"To oblige me."

"I cannot see how I should thereby oblige you, my dear."

"Call it my whim if you will, only do as I request, and let Leechcomb go away ignorant of all this."

Had the superintendent been younger, he might have suspected there was more in the request than appeared on the surface; but he had learned to consider all that Isabel said or did as perfect, and he acquiesced on the present occasion without many words; and after bidding her call him if the "stranger" regained consciousness, went away.

Isabel was once more alone with the hunter, and the calmness she had shown when talking with Mr. Just had vanished. She looked at her patient nervously, seeming very unlike the usually calm teacher.

"He will soon recover, and then—will he recognize me? But I know he will, and he will reprove me for the past. I wish I was a thousand miles away, but as he is here, wounded and sick, I dare not leave him near Leechcomb. Better that I should suffer than that—"

She paused as the hunter moved his head uneasily, and it seemed for a moment as though she would flee. She knew the movement foretold recovery, and she dreaded the interview as she had never dreaded an interview before.

Several minutes passed, during which the only sound which broke the stillness of the room was the solemn ticking of the clock—though it seemed to Isabel that her heart beat even louder.

At last the wounded man opened his eyes. His gaze fell on unfamiliar objects, and then wandered about the room in a puzzled way, but as it encountered Isabel's face it became fixed.

The two looked at each other steadily, but with the girl it was because she could not turn away. She dreaded what was to follow. Wonder, surprise and incredulity were expressed on the hunter's face. The face was one betraying strength of character, but it was also noticeable for an expression of combined melancholy and bitterness.

It was he who broke the silence at last.

"You—here?" he slowly muttered.

"Yes."

Her voice was only a whisper, and her gaze fell. Bitter indeed was that moment to her.

CHAPTER VII.

WHISKY JOHN AND HIS KNIFE.

The wounded man passed his hand over his face with an uncertain, puzzled gesture, and then looked again as though he expected a vision had vanished. But the Mission teacher was still there.

"Isabel!" he said.

"Yes," said she, trying to make her tone a matter-of-fact one.

"Am I dreaming, or are you here?—you, Isabel Dalton."

"I am here," she replied. "Nothing is too strange to happen, and we meet again after many years. It is by chance, however, and we may let it pass without comment. Very likely the sight of my face is unpleasant to you, but no one need know we ever met before. You have been injured and are now in a hospital, while I am for the time your nurse. Let that suffice."

She spoke feverishly, anxious that he should understand the situation before he had time to speak fully, for she expected he would order her away.

But he only knit his forehead and looked at her in perplexity.

"I do not understand," he said. "How came you here in the wild land of Oregon?"

"Because I had to live somewhere."

"Wasn't Canada wide enough for you?"

"I preferred Oregon."

He was silent for a moment and then slowly added:

"It is a strange place for one like you."

"Let us not speak of that, but of yourself. You have been wounded."

"I remember," he said, frowning. "The cowards shot me in the back. Ah!—ah! I see!"

"What?" she slowly asked, surprised by his sudden energy.

"You are Madame Basil St. Cyr."

"I!" indignantly cried the girl.

"You."

"It is false! I have not seen or spoken to him for years."

"You are strangely near him."

"It is not my fault, nor my work, that he came to Oregon. I forbid the mention of his name, which is one I detest. Give your attention wholly to yourself. By whom were you wounded?"

"Whom, except Basil St. Cyr?" he bitterly said.

Isabel looked at him wonderingly.

"Is this a fact?"

"Yes."

"About what did you quarrel?"

A tinge of color came into the pale face of the wounded man, but he curtly replied:

"That is of no consequence; we need not speak of it. He and his fellows did for me, however, after valiantly attacking me in the rear. How badly am I hurt? I feel somewhat broken up, but I hope I have life enough left to get at them some day. Whether you like St. Cyr or not, I hate him; and I intend to pay off all debts I contract if strength is given me."

Isabel had been trying to interrupt, but he spoke with bitter vehemence and evidently intended to say what he had to say. When he was done she tried to calm him, but though he became silent it was not from any peaceful cause. Looking at Isabel, a bitter expression came to his face, and he turned his head aside and spoke no more. He was dizzy from the blow he had received, and he told himself he was in no condition to cope with so cunning a schemer as she.

Something of this she read in his face and her eyes filled with tears she would not have him see for a good deal. She had known Neal Girdley in the past, and once it had seemed that they would unite their fortunes for life, but misunderstandings had separated them and Girdley believed her evil, treacherous and designing.

During this period of silence and inactivity, neither was conscious that other eyes were upon them, but such was the fact. On the northern side of the larger building was a smaller one, or, rather, half of one, for it was a "lean-to," and directly above it was a window which was open on this warm evening.

At the window was visible, had they chanced to look, a strange face. It was that of an Indian, for the complexion was brown, and long, straight black hair framed the face, but it was unusually homely even for a Chinook's.

It was more than homely; it was repulsive. A close survey would have convinced a person that this man was afflicted with small-pox, or some other cutaneous disease, or else that he had experimented with the bane of some white men—liquor.

A hard-looking face was his.

It was raised just above the casing of the window, while he watched the pair inside the room with glittering eyes. Once he drew back, took a flask from his pocket and drank long and heartily, after which he resumed his espionage.

After awhile he seemed to grow restless, but both Girdley and Isabel had ceased to move, and he thought the time had come to carry into effect a plan he had in his mind. This plan was to drive a knife into Girdley's breast.

Had the spy seen less of his flask he would never have formed the idea, for Isabel, at least, was not likely to sleep, and he could not cross the floor to reach the wounded man without alarming her.

But the whisky was in and his wits out, and he attempted it.

When he moved it was with the caution of his race, and he lowered himself through the window with scarcely a sound to betray him. He stood on the floor, and he held his knife in a tenacious grip and looked fixedly at Isabel, to see, before advancing further, whether she had yet heard him.

But she had not. Her gaze was averted, and she was too deeply buried in melancholy thought to heed a slight sound, such as had thus far been made.

The Indian moved one foot forward, his eyes sparkling like a serpent's with murderous desire but as he did so there was a light sound behind him and the knife was wrested from his grasp.

A guttural exclamation fell from his lips and he wheeled quickly, and then the mischief was done. He had alarmed Girdley and Isabel, and both were looking at him in a startled manner. He saw only the tall, slender figure which had last appeared on the scene, and, holding his knife, confronted him with a stern face.

He recognized this person, and so did Isabel. It was Hotspur, the Will-o'-the-Wisp. Nor was this all. In the first intruder—he who had come with murder in his heart—the teacher recognized Hotspur's father, the Whisky John before referred to.

Hot anger had been in the Indian drunkard's heart as he turned, but one long look at his son's face was enough to change his appearance. The battle fire faded away and he crouched like a whipped cur before its master.

"Here you are," said Hotspur, coolly.

"I'm ready to go home," meekly observed Whisky John, using the same good English observed in his offspring.

"You'd better have gone long ago," said the boy, sternly; then, turning to Isabel: "Sister, do not be afraid."

"Why in blazes are you here?" Girdley asked with pardonable emphasis. "Isabel, oblige me by handing over a weapon of some sort. I'll try to carve these fellows up, if I am in the hospital."

"No," replied the girl, recovering her self-possession when she fully realized who the intruders were. "There is no danger when Hugh is around."

"No," added the youth. "I am Striking Eagle, a warrior of the Chinook nation, but I am a friend of the white man."

"So am I," chimed in Whisky John. "My heart is large, and I am a friend to all—see!"

He spread out his hands as though to include as many as was possible, but his son took him by the shoulder and shook him rudely.

"Be still!" he said; "they are not blind here."

"You are right," said Girdley, "and I want to know what means this intrusion. Talk freely, or I'll alarm whoever is about."

"Stop!" said Isabel, hurriedly. "Hugh is right; he is, indeed, a friend. But your father, Hugh—why is he here?"

"I have repented," said old John, smiting himself on the breast. "I am not myself tonight. Usually my heart is large toward all Boston, but to-night I drank of fire-water and my head went wrong."

"And you came in here to do murder," questioned Girdley, sternly.

"I am an unhappy man, but I knew not what I did," protested the drunkard, cringing almost to the floor.

"What manner of men are these? They speak English as well as you or I. Perhaps you know them, Isabel?"

"She is my friend, my best friend!" declared John.

Hotspur made an impatient gesture.

"Speak plainly," he said. "Who sent you here?"

"Sent me? No one, no one, no one!" asserted the drunkard, and he might have gone on forever had not Girdley impatiently interrupted.

It was clear to the hunter that the men were there with evil designs, and he determined to summon whatever power was at hand and have them taken into custody, but when he announced his purpose, Isabel changed it materially by informing him that it was Hugh who had found him insensible and bleeding in the forest and brought him to the Mission.

She also gave him an idea of what Whisky John was.

While they were talking, Striking Eagle had been trying to get the truth from his father. He had been warned that the old man was on his way to the Mission, and as he never went there without a purpose, Hugh had promptly followed.

He reached the place just in time to take part in this scene.

But why had old John entered the house with murderous intentions? This was the question the trio asked themselves. The old Indian declared that he had been unconscious of what he had been doing; that he had moved under the influence of liquor; and with many contortions and grimaces he protested that he loved his white brethren, the "Bostons."

Unfortunately for him, Isabel knew him well. He was a vicious and singular man. No one had ever been able to account for his knowledge of the English language, and he had an undeniable intelligence, but whisky was his curse. It had ruined him, mentally and physically. If he had ever had a degree of honor it was gone, and he would commit any crime for his beloved enemy.

It was, however, a peculiarity of his peculiar nature that though he might try to commit murder, as in the present case, he would become the most abject coward living when discovered, and many a time had he groveled at his son's feet when detected in his evil ways.

Despite this fact he was a dangerous man, and a "Boston" who trusted him would do so to his sorrow. Whisky John had no love for the Bostons. Such of them as he knew, with the exception of Jake Mulligan and one or two others, were opposed to liquor in Oregon, while the "King George" men, represented by unscrupulous agents of the Hudson Bay Company, would give him and his fellow Chinooks anything they desired to gain their good will—and the vast quantity of furs to be had along the Columbia and its tributaries. Consequently, Whisky John was to be classed as an ardent King George man, and, though he might at times cower and grovel before the Bostons, he was no more to be trusted than a temporarily chilled serpent.

Such was the father of Hotspur Hugh and Blue Jay.

Isabel made Girdley understand old John's nature, and when he knew he owed his rescue in the forest to Hugh, he offered no objection to the two going away together. He strongly suspected who had sent the Chinook to the Mission, but all efforts to obtain a confession proved unavailing, John stoutly persisting that he had not been sent by any one, but had got drunk and followed a mere caprice.

Failing to make him talk, he was sent away in charge of Hugh, going as meekly as possible, yet, like a snake in coil, ready to strike a deadly blow. For Hugh, Girdley had taken a fancy, and it was arranged that the youth should come to the Mission the next day to see him.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARKED FOR DEATH.

We left Luke Bloodrod and Lona Mulligan just as the former had foiled an attempt on his life by overpowering his assailant, and as the whisky-trader and Basil St. Cyr were seen approaching.

Their arrival was most inopportune, and Lona, conscious that she had been saying more than loyalty would allow concerning her villainous father, was filled with dismay.

He had practically absolved her from all allegiance to him by his repeated crimes, but she clung to him with woman's singular constancy, despite all.

Bloodrod was surprised to see how quickly his would-be assassin melted, as it were, under his grasp. The man was a degraded-looking Indian, and, at first, had seemed warlike enough, but the white man's remarkable power had proved him his master, and the Chinook's hostility was swept away as by a breath.

It will be remembered that Lona uttered a name at this moment; the name of "Whisky John." This will help to explain why the Chinook's courage went so suddenly.

Mulligan and St. Cyr came up quickly, and Bloodrod saw a half-concealed scowl on the former's face.

"Hello! hello!" he exclaimed. "What's goin' on hyar?"

"The small end of an assassination," evenly replied Bloodrod, giving Whisky John a push which prostrated him on the ground. "Is this the sort of neighbors you have, honest man?"

The whisky-trader looked at each of the others by turn and seemed uncertain how to proceed, but it was clear that Whisky John did not get his share of attention. It was on his guest and his daughter that Jake bestowed the most attention. Why were they together? An hour before he had introduced them. They had acknowledged it coldly, almost silently. Now, they were together in the wood. What did it mean?

Mulligan glared at his daughter, and his eyes asked the question his lips longed to frame:

"Have you betrayed me?"

Lona read the look and was seized with a nervous trembling. She had betrayed him; she had told the stranger his real name, and cautioned him to flee at once if he would save his life. It would be like Jake Mulligan to punish such treachery with death.

As for Whisky John, he cowered where he had fallen, like a whipped cur, and said nothing.

Bloodrod spoke, and his unchanged manner did more than words could to convince Mulligan he had not been betrayed. Then all attention was turned on the old Chinook, who had never seemed in a more lowly mood. He groaned and twisted, vowed that he had done what he had when drunk, and seemed on the whole too miserable a worm to be a villain.

He deceived Bloodrod, but the others had known him too well and long for that. However, Lona dared not speak, and Jake and St. Cyr had no intention of doing so, and all were satisfied when Bloodrod drove him away.

Mulligan introduced the other men, and they clasped hands as warmly as though no cloud was on the sky, and St. Cyr even threw in some fine-spun remark about the pleasure he felt at the meeting.

Lona, however, had nothing to say. Her heart was sick with dread. Did Bloodrod intend to disregard her warning?

"Well, let him do so if he will," she muttered. "I've warned him, and if he can't keep out of the fire it ain't my fault."

Later, her father came to her, while Bloodrod and the Frenchman talked at one side.

"What have you been sayin' ter him?" Jake asked, pointing to his late passenger.

"Nothing," she curtly replied.

"Don't lie, gal."

"How can I, when I've had your teaching?" was the scornful inquiry.

"You want ter curb your tongue; that's what ye want ter do," roughly declared Mulligan. "B'ar in mind that I've got an eye on ya, gal. I ain't over an' above sure o' yer good faith, but I mean you shall keep in their traces or—git out o' ther way."

Hedrew one finger across his throat, but she again smiled scornfully. She had heard the threat before.

"A precious valuable existence I'd lose. There's a good deal of happiness in being Jake Mulligan's daughter."

A red flush crept into his bronzed face. It was the first time his degradation had been cast in his teeth by her, and it cut deeply. For a moment it seemed as though he would strike her, but, instead, his tense muscles loosened and he spoke in a voice far less harsh.

"Fa'r an' squar', gal, hev you tolle the Boston all?"

It was a question she could safely answer in the negative, for she had not told all, and her reply satisfied him. He believed in her as much as he did in any one, though his habit of seeking out his best friends when it was to his advantage, made him doubtful of others.

"Lona," he added, "you wanter sleep sound ter-night."

Her face paled.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't you understand?"

"No."

Mulligan looked toward Bloodrod, but the French captain had him busy and he seemed unconscious of the dialogue occurring so near him.

"You see ther Boston, gal? Wal, he says he's only a trav'ler hyar, an' he believes I'm a common settler, but I happen ter know he's an agent o' ther Washington Government. Lies hev been tolle about Oregon, an' ther Bostons are mightily afeerd ther British will git ther hull Columbia country, jest ez ther Hudson Bay Company is foolin' tuer Astoria gang all ther while. Result: This hyar Bloodrod has been sent from ther East ter poke his nose inter our affairs, an' ter see ef if it is advisable ter send United States troops hyar. He'll find out, durn his head!"

Mulligan spoke with extreme bitterness, and, as he glanced again at Bloodrod, fingered his knife nervously.

"Oregon sile may make sorter a troubled place ter live, but ther Boston will find its groves is quiet, cool an' easy."

Lona shivered, and her blood seemed turning to ice. An appeal was on her lips, but the whisky-trader had time only for a warning when Bloodrod advanced.

"Honest Brittles," he said, with the same light, happy-go-lucky manner as of old, "I lack the endurance of a woodsman like you, and it will suit me better to get into the house than to stand around here. Besides, it is already growing dark."

The "honest man" did not object, so he bade good-night to St. Cyr and walked toward the cabin, accompanied by Lona and Bloodrod. Once, the girl looked around at the Frenchman. He was lingering at the edge of the wood, but his gaze was on her, and as her attention became fixed on him he lifted his hat with mocking politeness and then threw a kiss.

She turned quickly, and he laughed softly.

"Mon Dieu, how she hates me! Ah! well, that need not prevent me from wringing her heart. By my life, it is more than passing odd that so many of the actors in that old Canadian drama should congregate in this wild land. Fair Isabel teaches at the prosaic Mission as zealously as though she was not once the gayest of the gay; pretty Lona, quondam servant, is the daughter of one of Oregon's worst citizens; I am in the service of the Hudson Bay Company; and to-day, to complete the wonder, I run upon Monsieur Neal Girdley. Why is he here? Business, pleasure, or—well, what matters it? Lemaire's pistol-shot settled his case forever. But I'll wager something neither Lona, Isabel nor Girdley suspected another of the trio except herself, or himself, was on the ground. Well, what do you want?"

St. Cyr broke off abruptly as a footstep sounded close at hand, and Whisky John stood bowing before him.

"Perhaps you want to drive a knife through me, as you tried to do through Bloodrod?"

"No, no!" declared the old Indian. "He was a Boston; you are a King George man."

"Wrong; I am a Frenchman."

"But you work for the King Georges."

"Let it pass. What do you want?"

"To-day my brother met an enemy in the wood and left him for dead."

"What of it?" sharply demanded St. Cyr, mentally deciding that Whisky John knew too much for his safety.

"He was not dead, but he was found by the Bostons and taken to the Mission."

St. Cyr started.

"To the Mission?"

"I have spoken."

The Frenchman's forehead contracted into a series of angry and dismayed lines. Taken to the Mission? If that was so, Neal Girdley and Isabel would soon meet, and he feared the consequences.

Whisky John readily gave particulars, keeping back only the fact that it was his son who had carried the wounded man to the Mission; and then it was that, asserting that he could go and come at the place as he wished, he asked for and received permission to kill Girdley, the price he set being enough money to buy a little of his beloved beverage.

We have seen how he succeeded.

When St. Cyr had finished his business with him they separated, and the Frenchman walked on alone.

"I'll go to the rendezvous at once and see Lemaire, after which we'll go to the meeting. When that is done, I'll attend to private affairs. If the Chinook don't kill Girdley, I'll try my luck on him again. This done, and Bloodrod removed by Mulligan, it will be clearer sailing."

CHAPTER IX.

MULLIGAN AS AN ASSASSIN.

BLOODROD followed the whisky-trader into the house with all the nonchalance in the world, and as he dropped into a chair, observed:

"Honest man, there's no place like home, is there?"

Ordinarily, Mulligan would have resented the intimation that his guest was at "home," but he let it go on the present occasion and graciously suggested that they "have a smoke."

Brimstone Jake, who was noted for his tendency to fall asleep, awoke from a doze in the corner, and modestly observed:

"I'll smoke, too, fur I'm a roarer!"

"You're a trump-card," said Bloodrod, crowding a coal into his pipe, "and I'm proud to know you."

Lona looked at the speaker in wonder. He seemed without a doubt or care, and his manner was as genial as though he had known the other men for years and found them like pure gold. Was he really skeptical in regard to her warning?

When she wondered thus, she showed she did not yet know Bloodrod fully. She did not know that a wonderful amount of nerve enabled him to hide his real feelings and thoughts; she did not know that when he talked so lightly with his companions he was secretly watching their every movement. Despite the odds, too, he felt himself their master.

Some of his time he devoted to studying Lona. He was beginning to have a good opinion of her, but it was taking a small chance to believe. It would be remarkable if Jake Mulligan's daughter was really possessed of honor.

The evening passed in a way supposed to be merry, and Bloodrod told some remarkably good stories, which made Mulligan double up with laughter, while Brimstone Jake admitted that the narrator was a "roarer."

But when the guest was stowed away in his chamber, the whisky-trader scowled blackly.

"Cuss ther varmint! I've had ter double up till my stummick aches, an' I'll carve him all ter pieces fur it. I hated ter play fool, but I had ter do it."

"So did I, fur I'm a roarer," said Brimstone Jake, which expression covered a good deal of ground with him.

Bloodrod, when once alone in his room, made a thorough examination of the place. He found it small, and by no means suited for a fortress, and he was satisfied that all the barricading in the world would not make it proof against intruders. He did not wish to make it so. Believing that Mulligan would force an entrance, he only desired that he would be speedy about it and have it over.

Finding a box at one side he placed his lamp inside of it, with the wick turned well down, and, thus throwing the room into darkness, sat down to await Mulligan's pleasure.

An hour passed—two hours.

Bloodrod had listened patiently at first, but he had grown rather impatient before the first sound of alarm was heard. It came at last; he heard stealthy movements outside the door; and he knew the decisive moment was at hand.

The door was tried, but as he had not secured it in any way, it yielded to the intruder's hand. He moved cautiously through, pausing now and then to listen.

Bloodrod waited coolly. He had never been more at his ease, and he was prepared to spring a surprise upon his evil-minded neighbor.

It came at last.

He raised the cover of the box quickly, turned up the wick, and a striking tableau was revealed.

Bloodrod sat in a chair, cool and smiling, with the lamp in one hand and a pistol in the other, and the muzzle of the weapon bore full upon Jake Mulligan, who stood, knife in hand, one of the most surprised and demoralized men in Oregon. Had he seen a ghost, he could not have been more moved.

"Hello, honest man, is it you?" Bloodrod questioned.

The whisky-trader's lips moved, but he made no audible sound.

"You did not mention that you would call on me, but there is a beautiful simplicity about off-hand calls like this which makes me fat an inch on the ribs."

"I—I came up ter see ef you slept well," stammered Mulligan, who was not troubled with remorse half so much as with confusion.

"Perhaps it was to make me sleep well that you brought the knife. I dare say, if properly taken, it would prove an effectual sedative."

"Didn't know I had it," grumbled Mulligan.

"Possible? How forgetful we are, at times. There's no knowing what other treasures you have about you. It may be you have an Indian wigwam, or a schooner, or a fork of Clarke's river."

"You're a funny cuss," growled the whisky-trader, who had enough wit in his head to be pretty sure that his purpose was fully understood, and that his guest had systematically trapped him.

"So I am, as I will try to prove. For instance, I'll wager something I can cut off the tip of one of your ears with this pistol, and never touch your head."

"Hold up! What're you talkin' about, any how?"

"About you, honest man. You have a confounded awkward way of stealing into a fel-

low's room, knife in hand. How do you explain it?"

"I thought ye needed air, an' I came in to pry up a board in ther ruff an'—"

"That will do, honest Mulligan. From this time out we may as well understand each other. You are the noted, and notorious, whisky-trader of the Columbia, a man whose face is familiar from Shoal-water Bay to Walla-walla, and whose fame has gone to Cape Cod. Men say, honest Mulligan, that you had as soon cut a man's throat as to sneeze."

Bloodrod still retained his seat, and his manner was light and airy, but a steel-like inflection had crept into his voice and Mulligan knew he had caught a Tartar. Still, the whisky-trader was no coward, and he faced him with eyes which were like coals, or ambushed tigers, as he drew down his heavy brows.

"You're mighty peart," he observed.

"Think so?"

"Yes."

"Your opinion don't count for as much as the eyesight of a blind mouse," said Bloodrod, serenely.

Mulligan grated his teeth.

"Don't carry this too fur."

"Is that a threat?"

"Drop that weepin, an' I'll show ye."

"If I drop anything, it'll be an honest man named Mulligan, and I really think I should be doing the world a favor thereby. You have a bad reputation, honest man."

"Honest perdition!" almost shouted Mulligan. "I'm tired o' hearin' that phrase. I might 'a' known that was a sneer about it when I fu'st heard it. Drop it, I say. I ain't honest, an' I don't mean ter be, durn your measly hide!"

"As modest as ever," said Bloodrod, with pretended admiration. "Worthy Mulligan, your equal don't exist along the Columbia—for which, the Lord be praised. Hold on, there, if you please!"

The whisky-trader had begun to siddle toward the door, but his guest's pistol brought him to a halt.

"One moment, honest man. Where is Brimstone Jake, the Roarer?"

"Down stairs," growled Mulligan.

"Asleep?"

"He probly is, by this time."

"Well, I am about to bid adieu to your hospitable roof, Mulligan, and I'll trouble you to conduct me out, past the Roarer and to the outer air. I am inclined to think I shall be safer there than with you. One word before we start. By this time I think we understand each other pretty clearly, so let me say that if you play one trick by the way, or try to injure me, I'll shoot you as I would a dog. Do you hear, my bull-dog cut-throat?"

Mulligan did hear, and, what is more, he understood. Bloodrod's voice had grown as keen and incisive as a razor, and it was clear he was a man of wonderful qualities. One might as well fool with a Bengal tiger as with him.

The whisky-trader promised to be faithful, and he meant it, too; so they began their journey to the outer door.

Mulligan went first and his guest followed, watching him keenly all the while, but, at the same time, giving a little attention to other matters. Where was Lona? He wished to see her, to assure her he was safe, but there was no sign of her.

In the kitchen Brimstone Jake was sleeping soundly, and proving his claim to be a "Roarer" by loud snoring. Mulligan looked at him as though he longed to call to him for aid, but he dared not try it, and they went on. The door was opened and Bloodrod stepped outside.

"Here we part, honest man," he said, coolly, "but I dare say we shall meet again. My experience here will long be remembered, and I shall insist on calling you one of my best friends. You're a yard wide, and a scoundrel of the eighteen-carat sort!"

He ended with a reckless laugh, but Mulligan could by no means appreciate such doubtful humor. He stepped back and slammed the door together, and as the other man saw himself thus isolated, he stepped briskly away for several yards.

He hesitated a moment before leaving, and wondered where Lona was, but silence hung around the place, and he felt little hope of meeting her.

"But I'd like to," he said, half aloud. "There is something decidedly attractive about her, if she is Jake Mulligan's daughter, and I may yet take time to learn whether she is angel or demon—Hello!"

His keen ears had detected a sound behind him, and he wheeled abruptly, just in time to see a dark figure. In a moment more his hand was on the unknown's throat.

"Stand where you are!" he ordered. "Show your colors, or down goes your craft!"

CHAPTER X.

THE WILL-O'-THE WISP GUIDE.

BLOODROD had expected resistance, or at least dismay, on the part of his captive, but the latter broke into a light laugh.

"Choke not, kill not!" he added. Bloodrod released his hold.

"Striking Eagle!" he exclaimed.

"You speak with a straight tongue," replied the wild boy. "It is I, and none the worse for your choking."

"I did not know you."

"Had I been an enemy, you would not have had time to fasten on my neck. I crept up like an Indian; you were gazing at an upper window of the cabin and dreaming like a white man."

Bloodrod supposed he had left the habit of blushing behind years before, but he flushed now, suspecting, rightly or not, that Hotspur had read more of his thoughts than he cared to have known.

"We will let it pass," he muttered.

"Ay, for I care nothing about it. 'Tis not the place of a warrior to pry into the affairs of his white brother. Hoolah! shall we go?"

"Where?"

"It prairie-dogs build their dens in the earth, we do not look for them on the side of the bold cliff, by the eagle's nest. If we would find where the dark men herd, we must seek."

"Do you mean that you have found a clew?"

Bloodrod more earnestly asked.

"I know that the Frenchman called St. Cyr has met his friend, Lemaire, and that the two have started up the river in a boat rowed by four men. I was following in my canoe, but, when we arrived opposite this cabin, I landed to see if I could see you. Now, you are here. What do you say?"

"Has St. Cyr gone on?"

"Yes."

"Then let us follow, by all means. Your reward shall be no mean one if you put me on their trail."

"Water leaves none, but Striking Eagle can follow where the birds fly. He comes of a race of warriors, and the blood is warm in his veins. If men went to war now as they did once, Striking Eagle would have a wigwam made from the scalps of his foes."

Bloodrod heard this sanguinary declaration without any alarm. His acquaintance with Hotspur was but brief, but he believed him a brave, lofty-spirited fellow, who concealed, under the boasting exterior of his Indian nature, a really worthy and honorable disposition. When he talked of deluging the world in human blood, the white man accepted it as an Indian metaphor, and did not worry about his own scalp.

The two had accidentally met in the forest a few days before, and the result of their conversation was a league between them. Bloodrod needed some one well versed in the Columbia country to discover certain things for him, and in the Will-o'-the-Wisp he believed he had found that person.

While Hugh spoke they had been hurrying toward the river. A canoe rocked by the bank; Bloodrod entered, the young Indian followed, and the buoyant craft once more floated on the water.

Hugh dipped his paddle with a skillful hand and they glided up-stream. Bloodrod sat in his place, his hand on a pistol, closely watching where they went. His view was not an extensive one. The night was dark; very dark; and the trees which bordered the bank only looked like blacker figures on a surface nearly as dark.

The night, albeit cloudy, was a fine one, and the grand river flowed on without any noise about it except the notes of night-birds, the distant cry of the wandering panther, and the almost inaudible dip of the Chinook's paddle.

The boy bent to his work with zeal, and the light craft cut the water like a fish.

"What if they should land before we overtake them?" asked Bloodrod, after a pause.

"No danger. If they are going to the meeting of the dark men they will go above the Giant's Arm; if they are not bound for the meeting, it will make no difference if we lose them."

"Suppose we run upon them unaware? You are paddling a good deal faster than a heavy boat will be likely to be rowed, and—"

"Have no fear," said the Will-o'-the-Wisp, a slight tinge of resentment in his voice. "I am an Indian, and I never make a mistake."

"Some Indians do."

"Hoolah! Yes, when their blood grows thin like that of the pale-faces."

"Have it as you will," said Bloodrod, laughing. "We won't quarrel over a theory, only be careful how you work."

"Have no fear. You are hunting the men who take the Indian by his hand with one of theirs, and stab him with the other; who give him whisky, which steals his brain away; who pay him for rich furs with gaudy baubles; who never thought of giving him missions to educate his children, as the Bostons have done. Hoolah! I know who is the Indian's friend."

Hugh spoke with unusual earnestness, and was so different from the madcap Bloodrod had before known that the latter felt renewed hope. He had come many weary miles to unearth the "Dark Men," as the young Indian called them, and who was so well fitted to help

him as this youth who knew the country for miles, and who could change from the wild boy to the grave trailer at will?

The canoe went shooting on for some distance, but Hugh suddenly turned its bow toward the southern bank and ran in so close that they almost touched the bushes, at the same time bidding his passenger be silent.

Bloodrod looked toward the middle of the river, and, though nothing was visible, could hear the sound of oars.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Wait!" replied Hugh.

He passed the other voyagers by a few fathoms and then raised his paddle and let the bark drift. The boat came on, with strong, sturdy strokes, and no attempt at concealment, while one of its occupants related a story to the evident enjoyment of his comrades.

"Bah!" said Hotspur, "they are like old women. Wise men never chatter and make much foolish talk like that."

Perhaps some one else thought so, too, for a stern voice suddenly sounded in the boat, commanding less noise.

Hugh touched his companion's arm.

"St. Cyr!" he said.

"Ay; I recognize his voice. We are, indeed, on the track. Pursue according to your judgment, which you have proved good, and we will see what will come of it."

The boat went on, its occupants wholly unconscious that they were being followed. The Indian ran no risk of discovery; the darkness was in his favor, and the strokes of his paddle were almost feather-like.

In this way two miles were passed, and Bloodrod was beginning to wonder where the voyage would end when the boat turned abruptly to the left.

"Hoolah!" said Hotspur, "it is the Giant's Arm."

Bloodrod knew what he meant. A good-sized river here joined the Columbia, and, from its size, was thus called by the Chinooks. Up this stream the boat turned, and the pursuit was continued, though more warily. The Giant's Arm was not so wide as the broad Columbia, and he feared they might be seen by men upon the banks.

No alarm was sounded, however, and they went on steadily and rapidly.

At the end of half a mile the foremost craft approached a bluff which rose like a battlement above the left bank, and as what seemed a bird-call sounded therefrom, Hugh raised his paddle clear of the water.

The call was repeated from the boat, and then came a voice undeniably human.

"How runs the river?"

"Strong, but rough," replied St. Cyr.

"Will there be rain?"

"There are clouds in the sky."

"The birds will suffer in the storm."

"Not if they seek their nests."

"Seek you yours then."

Bloodrod had at first recognized a part of the peculiar conversation he had heard between Mulligan and Brimstone Jake, and he was satisfied that he was at last on the trail.

As the boat resumed its way and neared the bluff, Hotspur again touched his passenger's arm.

"We go this way," he said, indicating a point just below the bluff.

"Pull on!" said the white man, tersely. "I trust all to you."

They went, the canoe touched the bank, they landed, Hugh concealed the craft under the bushes and then turned his face toward the bluff. Bloodrod followed, striving in vain to imitate the boy's almost noiseless movements. Hugh was no longer a madcap, but the blood of his ancestors was strong in his veins and he could follow the trail like a young Pontiac.

Up the ledge they went. St. Cyr had just landed and was being greeted by other men, but not long did they delay. They moved north, closely followed by their tireless pursuers.

In a little glade, hemmed in by cliffs and an almost jungle-like wood, a fire burned brightly. Around it were collected a score of men, all rough-looking fellows who, if not suited for a lady's parlor, were able to make their way through any danger of the backwoods, whether it be one of flood, fight or panther-hunt.

To this circle came St. Cyr, and close behind him came his pursuers. Striking Eagle looked with an eye worthy of the bird for whom he was named, and then led the way to the top of the cliff.

A striking picture lay below the spies; the rough camp, the blazing fire, the hardy fellows around it, and the darkness of the night around and above all.

What would be the next development for Bloodrod's attention?

CHAPTER XI.

THE BROTHERS OF THE GIANT'S ARM.

It was clear to Bloodrod that St. Cyr was a man of importance among this rough crowd; everything that was said or done showed that he was either a recognized leader or one whose favor the others wished to win.

Which of the two was the correct assumption was soon shown.

St. Cyr arose and addressed the crowd, and the spy found corroboration of all he had suspected in the speech. It would take too much space to give it in detail, nor is a summary necessary here, but certain facts became clear as the Frenchman proceeded.

First, it seemed that St. Cyr's present hosts called themselves the "Banded Brothers of the Giant's Arm," and that, somewhere near the river, they had a distillery where they made whisky. All were under the orders of Jake Mulligan, who had furnished money at the beginning for the enterprise, and who still reaped the lion's share of profit. This liquor was sold to the Indians, who aided their allies by raising the grain necessary for the purpose, and valuable furs were obtained for a very little of the "fire-water."

Mulligan, however, had to pay for the privilege of thus making money, and St. Cyr was the recipient of his tribute. Ostensibly, the money went to the Hudson Bay Company, which St. Cyr represented. Whether the company ever received any of it was best known to the Frenchman himself.

Recently, however, the gang had found their business in danger. The people of the various missions along the Columbia and its tributaries found their work of educating and converting the Indians seriously retarded by the fact that the red-man would all too often get drunk just as he seemed likely to become religious, and the missionaries quickly saw clearly that nothing could be done while Jake Mulligan carried on his business.

Luckily there was a way to reach him through the law. He had lived a rough life of crime, and the officers of law stood ready to arrest him at any moment, but, first of all, they desired to learn where the distillery was and break it up.

It was for this purpose Bloodrod was in Oregon. He knew he was daring a good deal when he undertook the work. The Hudson Bay Fur Company had never loved their American neighbors of the Columbia country; in fact, sharp rivalry in trade had often gone to open quarrels and fights, and St. Cyr was supposed to be ready to secretly uphold Mulligan with all the Hudson Bay power.

Whether his superior officers knew what he was doing we need not pause to inquire.

Bloodrod, listening from the top of the cliff, found all his suspicions confirmed by the Frenchman's speech. The latter unreservedly promised the Banded Brothers that the Hudson Bay men would be the first, last and always; that the "Boston" spies should be found and killed, and that, if necessary, the Missions along the river should be burned to the ground.

This cold-blooded assertion showed that the Mission people had not exaggerated the temper of the opposition against them, as well as that St. Cyr was filling a bigger hole than agents of the Hudson Bay Company usually did.

Bloodrod suspected even they would condemn him.

When the Frenchman sat down, he was followed by a tall, powerful Indian, and Hugh leaned toward his friend and said in a low voice:

"It is Naika, chief of the Molacks!"

The white spy grew freshly interested. He had heard of the strange Indian village whose people were called by the name Hugh had spoken, but this was the first time he had to his knowledge seen one. Naika—the word meant "I" in the Chinook language, and was used by the Molack chief as his only name—was a tall, powerfully built man, and both in form and face Bloodrod saw his dissimilarity to the Chinooks. He more resembled the tribes along the Missouri river.

Naika spoke and the spy had some genuine Indian eloquence. The chief's English was poor, but his choice of words was excellent, and the same might have been said of his ideas had they not been so sanguinary.

He announced himself as the friend of the "King George men" and the foe of the "Bostons," and complained bitterly of the treatment of the Molacks by the United States traders. Furthermore, he said he was convinced that it was to the interest of the red-men to sweep this pernicious lot of white men out of Oregon, and that he was ready to take the war path whenever the King George men would ally themselves with him.

He added that the New England Mission ought to be the first place to fall.

When he sat down he was liberally applauded by the Banded Brothers, but Hotspur leaned forward and laid his hand on Bloodrod's arm.

"The Molack is a fool!" he said. "St. Cyr is playing with him. If the Mission is ever burned, the Molacks will get all the blame."

Even then the spy thought that it was a pity all the Indians were not as clear-headed as the boy. Were they so, this meeting would never have been.

St. Cyr closed the speech-making in a grandiloquent manner, and assured the Molacks, of whom several were present, that the work should go forward and the Bostons be driven from the Columbia country.

While the spies watched the group below,

neither of them had failed to watch the top of the bluff, for they did not covet discovery, but danger came in a way they did not expect.

There was a sound of light footsteps, a breaking through the bushes of a light body, and then the warning bark of a dog sounded loudly on the air.

Striking Eagle wheeled like a flash, knife in hand, and had the dog continued to advance he would have fared badly; but he seemed to get an inkling of his peril, and suddenly paused, hesitated, and then fled yelping vociferously.

"We bes' get away from here!" said Hotspur, breaking into poor English in his excitement.

There was no doubt but he told the truth, nor was Bloodrod slow about following the suggestion. Both rose and ran along the top of the bluff, keeping as much concealed by the bushes as possible.

There would have been no trouble from the men by the camp-fire, but what the fugitives feared came to pass. Dark forms appeared in their very path, and a stern challenge rung out on the air.

"Halt! Who goes there? Stop, or you're dead men!"

And the click of a rifle emphasized the order.

"The river!" said Hotspur. "Jump from the bluff!"

Bloodrod was on strange footing, and as he remembered that he had no knowledge of the depth of the water he might have hesitated, had not the youth, after running to the extreme edge, turned and sent forth a derisive yell, which was probably meant for a full-blown whoop.

Then he disappeared.

The spy could hesitate no longer. To remain meant sure capture and perhaps speedy death, and he took the leap. He never forgot his sensations while falling. Impenetrable darkness was all around, and with no knowledge of the substance upon which he would alight, he had a chance to imagine all the possible horrors in the world. If he fell on stones, his career was forever past.

The suspense ended as he shot into what seemed a Pacific ocean of water, and with the instincts of a skillful swimmer in full play, he turned to the left when once he obtained control of himself, swimming lustily.

When he arose he judged he was near where the canoe had been left, but he was somewhat dazed until a cool voice pronounced his name, and the Will-o'-the-Wisp appeared beside him.

"Get to the bank!" directed the boy. "They will soon be on the track like bloodhounds."

There was no doubt of this, and Bloodrod was not slow to obey the wise direction. Both struck out together, but Hugh seemed more fish than man, and he was in the canoe and ready to leave by the time the spy was ready to embark.

He swung himself into the craft, and then it shot away from the bank.

They were none too soon. Shouts were arising from above, mingled with the splashing of water, and it was clear a sharp pursuit was to be made.

"They can't catch us with those clumsy boats," said Bloodrod, his usually cool blood firing with the excitement of the moment.

"The Molacks may have canoes," replied Hugh, briefly, as he bent to his work, and made their light craft shoot ahead like a flash.

"At any rate, our battery is in position," said the spy, raising the rifles, which had been left in the canoe when they climbed the bluff.

The race was fairly begun, and it is doubtful if the Giant's Arm ever saw one like it. They went shooting down at full speed, Hotspur Hugh leading the way, while the pursuers strung along in a long line. They could barely discern the foremost craft, and were resolved to run her down.

The fugitives would have taken to the woods had it not been for one thing. Better race on the water than where the dog could follow their trail.

They shot out on the broad surface of the Columbia without any great change in their position, but as the race was continued there the pursuers spread out and their chances increased.

Several of the other craft shot ahead, too, and Striking Eagle read the cause at once.

"Hoolah!" he said, "the Molacks are there in their canoes. Look sharp, now, for the race will be hot!"

CHAPTER XII.

LEECHCOMB MAKES A VISIT.

THE Chinook's prophecy seemed sure to be verified, but as they swept on down the river it was difficult to see any change in the relative positions of pursuers and pursued. The former had strung out cunningly, however, with canoes on each flank, and the slower-moving boats in the center, and Hotspur Hugh was not troubled to see that it was their intention to surround them.

Had the lead been greater the youth would have laughed at this, but he could not safely

turn to either bank, and everything looked like a long stern-chase.

"I wish I could help you," said Bloodrod, who was also studying the situation closely.

"Perhaps your time will come," said Hugh.

"How so?"

"We may have to swim."

"Well, we can do it, if necessary."

"I think they are not coming so fast as they can, and it may be there is a trap ahead for us. If anything happens, dive and swim to the north bank."

"Why the north?"

"Because they will expect us to go south."

The reason was sufficient, and Bloodrod asked no more questions. He began to consider a collision inevitable, however. Some of the Molack canoes were either fleet or stronger manned than the pursued, and they were closing in on each side.

Striking Eagle sat erect in the canoe and his eyes flashed with defiance.

"The Molacks are working for nothing," he said, disdainfully. "Do they think they can capture a warrior? Men say the Chinooks are good only to hunt and fish, but I, Striking Eagle, scorn the Molack dogs."

That the Will-o'-the-Wisp felt all that he expressed the spy did not doubt, but, while retaining his own coolness admirably, he did not underrate the danger and expected serious trouble before the end was reached.

Trouble came sooner than he expected.

A sharp cry broke from Hotspur Hugh's lips, and then a large, heavily-manned canoe appeared in their very path. One glance was enough to show Bloodrod that a collision was inevitable; he heard a shout from the other craft which, though in a strange tongue, was doubtless a command to halt; and then Hugh spoke again.

"Take to the water!" he shouted.

Bloodrod obeyed. Standing not on the order of his going, he went over the canoe's edge with a strong plunge. Striking Eagle was not so hasty. He arose in the bark and sent forth a wild war-whoop which echoed far along the river; then, just as the two canoes were about to strike he shot out of sight.

The pursuers had triumphed; by a stratagem they had surrounded the fugitives, but when their victory seemed complete they found only an empty craft as the spoils of victory.

Bloodrod struck out for the river's bank with strong and confident strokes, arising for breath only when such a thing became necessary. Looking back he could see the pursuers were in confusion, and he knew they had not succeeded as well as they hoped.

He reached the bank without further adventure and climbed to land. At first he thought he was sole occupant of the place, but, as he stood shaking the water from his garments, he heard a quiet chuckle and Hugh stepped forth.

"You are always ahead of me," said he.

"A Chinook should be first, not last. That is left to the Molack dogs, and to the Brothers of the Giant's Arm."

"If the Brothers' swearing is a criterion, they are mad clear through," said the spy, laughing.

"They know dangerous enemies have escaped."

"Right, Striking Eagle, right! We know more than is to their good, and if I don't use the knowledge to their hurt, it'll be because they get at me first—and I don't think they will. I am sure they did not see me so as to recognize me again. But you—you are better known along the Columbia. Trouble may come to you through it."

"Hoolah! Does a Chinook care? Danger is the Indian's daily life, his companion and his pleasure. Have no fear for me."

Convinced that the boy was not to be alarmed, the spy said no more and their journey was resumed. There was no further danger from the pursuers, but it was not wise to loiter around the place, so they set their faces west and moved away.

The following day Jake Mulligan was seated in his cabin, thoughtfully smoking, while Brimstone Jake dozed in the corner, when there was a knock at the door.

The whisky-trader laid his hand on his rifle and said come in, and then the door opened and a man did walk in; a stranger to Mulligan, but a man of such a bland and sanctimonious face that his host at once decided that he was "a sermonizin' fool," as he afterward said.

"Good-mornin', sir," said the visitor, with a voice as bland as his manner.

"Mornin'," growled Mulligan.

"I called in for a friendly chat."

"You did, hey?"

"Yes. My name is Obed Leechcomb, but, being a stranger in Oregon, I do not know yours."

At this moment Brimstone Jake partially aroused.

"I'm a Roarer," he said, and then, finding a new position for his head, fell asleep again.

"How singular!" observed Mr. Leechcomb.

"What do you want byar?" asked the whisky-trader, roughly. "I'm no fool, an' I

know you've got a fish ter fry somehow. How, an' why?"

"My dear sir, you are mistaken," said Obed, mildly. "I am a man of peace, in the fullest sense of the word. More than this, I am a religious man, and the good people at the East to whose society I belong have just appointed me their Oregon agent, to have general charge of the Mission-schools along the Columbia."

Mulligan sat bolt upright, his brutal face harsh and forbidding.

"You look like jest sech a sneak ez that!" he loudly exclaimed.

"My dear sir!" said Mr. Leechcomb, putting up his hands as though shocked.

"An' I've a mind ter take ye an' ram yer head ag'in' that wall till ye can see a ten million Missions on ther half-shell!"

Mulligan's face was red, and it was clear that the "Boston" agent was in real danger.

"Now don't put in any palaver," he added, "but come right ter ther p'int at once, say that you knew afore ye come byar that I was Jake Mulligan, ther whisky-trader, an' that that was why ye came. Wal, may your Lord help ye, fur you'll never go away ter tell how ye spied on Jake Mulligan!"

He pulled his rifle toward him, but Leechcomb laughed serenely.

"Wait, my dear Mulligan. Don't kill the goose which may lay the golden egg."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Worthy sir, my piety is not so strong that I object to making a dollar, and if you will pay for the privilege you may have as much swing around the Columbia country as you wish!"

Leechcomb made the assertion with a vigor which caused Brimstone Jake to partially arouse and proclaim himself a Roarer, but the whisky-trader was not so easily convinced. He was prepared to believe his visitor would sell the souls of other men and never turn a hair, but it might be his precious self who was in danger of being sold now.

Consequently, a lengthy conversation followed, but Leechcomb succeeded in carrying his point. He had come to betray the Mission people, and he did it so far as he could. Representing that he had full charge of affairs in Oregon, he told Mulligan he could do all the business he wished if he would make it an object to him pecuniarily.

Mulligan, however, had not forgotten Bloodrod, and he asserted that a spy was already working against him, much to the agent's surprise.

Who and what was the man?

He felt sure the Mission people would not send such a man to the field without notifying him, the newly-appointed agent. From where had he come then, and what was his object?

With these questions before them the two rascals could not feel that their alliance was a complete success, and it was agreed that Bloodrod must be "taken care of," as Leechcomb observed in his oily way.

When their business was concluded and their alliance fully cemented, the agent took his departure, parting from Mulligan with a blessing suitable to his treacherous nature. Brimstone Jake aroused and put in his old claim, and then Leechcomb left the cabin.

All the while he was there he had been looking about as though he wished to see some one not visible, and as he was walking toward the river his eyes suddenly brightened as he came face to face with Lona.

Both paused and locked at each other for awhile in silence. Leechcomb was triumphant; the girl was calm and cold.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," he said, at last.

"I saw you before," she tersely added.

"I am glad you did not avoid me."

"I wished to know what new villainy you had afoot," she replied, with a cold contempt which brought a slight flush to his face, though it quickly faded.

"You have surmised rightly when thinking I have work for you."

"I decline to have any part of it!" she declared.

"You will change your mind and do what I wish," the agent said, his voice as mild as ever, but his face now stubborn and set. "Come, do not beat against the bars; you know me of old."

Lona looked at him as though she would gladly have attacked him, but she made an effort to be calm and replied:

"What do you wish?"

"I want you to go to the New England Mission."

The girl recoiled.

"To the Mission?"

"Ay."

"I will not do it!"

"Why not?"

"What has one like me to do with such a place? They would drive me out; perhaps she—Isabel Dalton—would recognize me. At the best, Missions are not for Jake Mulligan's daughter!"

She spoke with a mere bitterness, but Leechcomb's bland face did not change.

"You are wrong, my dear child. Alone, you might find it hard to enter the Mission, though

old Just pretends to be such a saint, but when I become your guarantee you can go anywhere; and as there is work which I wish you to do, you will enter the Mission as soon as you can get ready."

CHAPTER XIII.

GIRDLEY GOES ASTRAY.

ONE of the most trusted of the Indian pensioners—an old fellow who had professed to have learned all Mr. Just tried to teach him—had the last night-watch by Neal Girdley's bedside. That he slept, himself, instead of attending to his duty, was clear, for when Mr. Just went to the room Girdley was gone. On the table lay a folded paper, upon the blank side of which was the single word "Isabel."

The superintendent was of too simple a nature to be surprised at this, or to think it odd that the girl should be thus familiarly addressed by one he supposed had not seen her until the previous evening. He was also too honorable to open another person's note, and he carried it to her with an explanation of the wounded man's absence.

"Read it, my dear," he said. "It may explain why he went."

Poor Isabel felt guilty enough. She suspected the tenor, if not the words, of the note, and felt that Just's confidence in her was misplaced. As for Girdley—

Well, she could not avoid a sigh, but she unfolded the paper with commendable composure. This was what was written there:

"ISABEL:—When you reappear in the morning I shall be gone. I dare say the fact will please you, while on my own part I prefer to go out and take my chances in the forest rather than to be near such a person as you have proved yourself to be. It is the greatest joke of the century to find you at this place—one of the force ostensibly sent to educate and Christainize the Indians: a joke on all except the Indians. Heaven help them, I say, if you take a fancy to betray them."

"Do not expect to see me again. I little expected to meet you here. Had I done so, I would not have come. Possibly if I go to the North Pole, we shall not meet again."

NEAL GIRDLEY."

Mr. Just had removed his spectacles and was wiping the glasses, so he saw nothing of the swift rush of color from the girl's face. Had he seen it he might have suspected, unworldly as he was, that it was caused by an aching heart.

"What does he say, Miss Gray?" he questioned.

"That he will not remain here to be a burden on us," replied Isabel, convinced that she must not have too much regard for the truth.

"Dear me! what gave him such a fancy?"

"I don't know, sir."

"It is absurd. We are here to help all who are worthy, white or red. Dear me, I did not suppose the young man would get such a fancy. Ha! it must be he was out of his head."

It required considerable argument to convince him that such was not the case, and that he ought not to send men to look for him, but he usually thought in the end as Isabel did, and he dismissed the subject with the observation that there was no understanding the freaks of young men.

In the meanwhile, where was Girdley? He had left the Mission by the same way in which Whisky John entered it, having no trouble in passing the so called watcher. Once on the ground he drew a deep breath, told himself the air was purer now he was beyond her home, literally shook the dust of the place from his feet, and went on into the forest.

He was not fit for the journey. His wound, which was not at all dangerous while properly cared for, had weakened him, and, coupled with the excitement of his encounter with Isabel, had given him a fever which bade fair to become serious now he had taken such a step.

With his rifle over his shoulder he went on, his face turned toward the east. He had no definite idea of where he was going, his only thought being to get away from the Mission, and he wandered on idly. Day dawned, but he did not stop. Game crossed his path, but he shot none of it. He was not conscious of hunger, and the fact that he must eat was forgotten.

In fact, he had fallen into a dreamy mood, and, with the fever keeping him up, the exercise of walking was not noticed.

As he went he was conscious that he at times crossed streams, some of them large enough to be called rivers, but what they were called he neither knew nor cared.

Finally he reached a rough country where locomotion was difficult, and he soon became aware that he was tired. A mid-day sun shone upon him, adding to his discomfort, and he drank at a cool fountain and then lay down in the shade.

He was soon asleep.

In the forest there were panthers and bears, but they did not come near him. Only the birds broke the stillness as they sung in the trees over his head.

An hour passed.

Then the sound of voices arose near at hand, accompanied by footsteps, and four men came through the bushes. They were passing care-

lessly on when one chanced to observe the sleeping hunter.

"Hallo! what hev we hyar?" he asked, in considerable surprise.

"A sleepin' beauty."

"He ain't none o' ther boyees."

"Who is he, then?"

"A spy!"

"Cuss ther critter, ef that's his caliber we'll fix him in short order!"

The last speaker had drawn his knife with a jerk and started forward, but one of his companions stopped him.

"Wait! Ef he was a spy, d'ye s'pose he'd lay down hyar an' go ter sleep?"

"Strikes me he looks sick, too."

The last two observations changed the current of affairs materially, and all looked at Girdley with interest. Who was he? It was a question they vainly asked, for his face was new to all, but there seemed no doubt but he was ill, and when the matter had been fully discussed it was agreed that they should wake him and let him tell his own story.

The fact that he had slept soundly through all their conversation seemed one item of proof that he was not their enemy. Had he been, he would not have slept so calmly where he was.

One of them shook him by the arm and he opened his eyes and then slowly sat erect, but, though his eyes were bright and keen, they could not see any gleam of real intelligence in them.

"Hello, comrade," said he who had aroused him.

"Hello, yourself," Girdley coolly answered.

"Been takin' a snooze?"

"I reckon."

"I don't recognize you."

"No?"

"No."

"I can't enlighten you any. Somehow, my name has slipped away from me. I am under the impression I'm a whole team of some sort, but I can't tell what."

He put his hand to his head in a dazed way, and the men exchanged glances.

"Where did you come from?"

"Don't remember that, either. Somehow, I feel as though a part of myself was lost. Have you seen my head lying around loose anywhere?"

"Crazy as a March hare," said one of the men, while the others exchanged suggestive glances.

"I should like to find it, for it's time for the meeting, you know," he added.

"What meetin'?"

"Wby, my head, body and limbs were to unite here, to-day. I thought you knew it."

"He's clean gone!" said one of the strangers.

"All astray."

"He'll be astray from life if we leave him here."

"Wolfe, entertain him for a second."

The other men went aside and talked for several minutes, during which time Wolfe did the work allotted him, laughing in the meantime at Girdley's odd fancies. Then they returned.

"You look like a bold fellow, my man," said one, bluffly addressing the wounded man.

"I am," promptly replied he.

"And ready for any work?"

"Any and all work, my good friend."

"From shooting a deer to cutting a throat?"

"Ay, ay; all of that!" said Girdley, promptly, and with no comprehension of what he was talking about.

"Perhaps you'd like to join hands with others of the same sort?"

"That I would. Where are they? Are you they? Now, then, this is just what I'm looking for. Give us your hand, brother, and we'll cut the first throat we find!"

It struck the spokesman of the party that this was rather too free and sanguinary talk even for a cut-throat, and that the stranger might not be in such a mood if he was not "astray" in his mind, but he had not only taken a fancy to him, but got the idea that he was a bold, reckless young man, and he resolved to carry out the plan he and his comrades had formed.

So Girdley was assisted to his feet, and they would have moved on had he not nearly fainted. So they laid him down again and made a litter of poles and withes, and upon this he was placed and borne away.

His talkative mood had already abated and he rode in silence. His general air was an observant one, yet he saw nothing with a critical eye. He saw the boughs of trees which floated along over his head and enjoyed the glimpses of blue sky he had through them, and he had a sort of triumphant feeling that he was going away from Isabel.

He even believed, somehow, that these men had come for the express purpose of bearing him away, and once he surprised them by saying aloud:

"You shall be well rewarded for this. She has ruined my life, and I can't breathe the same air she does. The further away you take me, the better I'll like it."

"He's all astray," said the unknown leader. "We'll take him in, though, and doctor him well, and as our reward I feel sure we'll get a

bold fellow who won't kick a dollar out of the room if it does drop from some other man's pocket."

Unconscious of the suspicious company into which he had fallen, Neal Girdley rode on, but his mind traveled faster than his body. It went entirely away and floated in space, and he cared as little what was before him as he knew.

But the men went on through the forest until they reached a strange valley, the entrance to which was down a rocky slope, where they wound around in almost corkscrew style, carrying the wounded man with difficulty; but when the bottom was reached, there were cabins nestled among the trees and the men were at home.

Neal Girdley was carried into one of these cabins and a bed made for him. By that time nothing could be extracted from him in the way of conversation, but one of the strangers who had some knowledge of wounds came and cared for him as though he had been a brother.

All were kind to him, yet Neal Girdley never went more widely astray, or into greater danger than when he entered the secret valley.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN GREEK MEETS GREEK.

OBED LEECHCOMB and Rufus Just sat together at the door of the Mission, while near them several Indian children rolled on the grass, and two Indian mothers held weakly babies in their arms and squatted like a new species of toad far enough away to be respectful, yet near enough to admire the great men at the door; and the scene was as calm and peaceful as any that that fast-sinking sun shone upon, far or near.

The grateful Indian women did not err in admiring Mr. Just. He educated their children and doctored whoever was sick, and they were grateful. The only point of difference lay in the fact that while their customs required them to shape their babies' heads fantastically by artificial means, the worthy superintendent believed in letting them grow as Nature intended.

And his word often prevailed in the matter.

Simple Mr. Just had taken a fancy to Agent Leechcomb, and he little suspected the inward sneers with which that wretch regarded his little Mission, or suspected that while Obed talked smoothly, he was planning to ruin that Eden into which he had come like a serpent.

The web of fate was weaving, however, and closed eyes would be opened before the work was done.

This peaceful scene was interrupted by the appearance of a third man who had a look anything but pastoral. From the wood he came striding toward the Mission, his whole air one of pride, force, confidence in himself and resolute purpose; while over his shoulder was a rifle, and in his belt a pistol and a knife.

No missionary was he.

Just and Leechcomb observed him with interest, and the former could not but regard him as a bold, manly-appearing young fellow, but he strode up with his trooper's step and took off his hat to cool his head before speaking.

"Good-morning," he then said. "Warm?"

"Yes, sir; it must be so for a pedestrian," Just courteously replied.

"Yes, though I scarcely noticed it until now, the river country is so fine. Do I address Mr. Rufus Just?"

"Such is my name, sir."

"Mine is Luke Bloodrod. I have a recommendation which I'll show you anon; just now, I am too fatigued."

The spy bent his penetrating gaze on Leechcomb, and Just introduced them. It was an important moment. Obed recognized the man Jake Mulligan had described to him, and wished some wandering lightning-bolt would saunter along and knock the spy out of time before he could insinuate his spying nose further into affairs along the Columbia, but he called up his most saintly air and assured Bloodrod he was pleased to see him.

What Bloodrod thought neither his tongue nor face told, but he regarded Leechcomb with composure. With an appearance of frankness he told Just that he was a rover in the West, and that he craved the privilege of stopping briefly at the Mission, and the worthy superintendent hesitatingly said he was welcome.

So did Leechcomb. The latter had marked Bloodrod for "removal," and it was certainly very kind of him to appear for slaughter without any trouble.

The only question was, was he really a spy, as the whisky-trader asserted? This question the agent resolved to have Bloodrod answer himself, and he began to question him cautiously, as a lawyer might.

It was a waste of breath, however; while giving an idea of the utmost frankness, the spy foiled him completely, and Leechcomb would have doubted that he was what Mulligan claimed had it not been for the undeniable resolution expressed in his face.

But Bloodrod made a successful entrance to the Mission, winning the good opinions of not only Mr. Just and Isabel, but of the brood of Chinook children that swarmed up from the adjacent village, led by Nellie, alias Blue Jay,

and of the squatting Chinook mothers who huddled their feverish babes under the shadow of the cabins.

Bloodrod had never seen so strange a scene. The Mission was remote and isolated, and though he took a temporary interest in the novelty of the affair, it seemed as though it would soon become unsupportably dull, or worse; but Isabel and her associates went on teaching the children the names of the mysterious characters which, Bloodrod dimly remembered, he had thought as a child must have bothered a carpenter a good deal to make them—A, B, C, and their associates; and Mr. Just dealt out medicine and religious teaching with equal liberality.

But, in the afternoon, there was a new sensation.

The spy had tired of all and stretched himself out on the ground under a tree when he saw a young woman leave another part of the wood and approach the Mission.

He sat erect, great surprise expressed on his face.

He had recognized her.

It was Lona Mulligan.

In saying this we say a good deal, for, though the girl had shown a promising vein of honor when she warned him of his danger, she had spoken bitterly of the Mission and its people, and had declared, when he advised the step, that she would never set foot there.

Now, he would have thought she had changed her mind, but he saw that her face was dark and sullen—it was not that of a person who meant to do well by herself or any one else.

"What in the Sphinx's name does it mean?" he muttered, frowning, and slowly arising.

Lona, however, did not see him. With her eyes downcast and her face sullen and forbidding, she walked straight toward the Mission door.

Isabel and Just were sitting just outside, together, and the latter was reading a tract aloud, but it fluttered from his hand to the ground at sight of his visitor. No woman with a white skin had before appeared at the forest home except when brought by his direction as a teacher.

Mulligan's girl raised her eyes and looked at them defiantly.

"I want to be taken in!"

She spoke abruptly, in a hard, fierce voice, and with such a show of hostility that Mr. Just started, knocked off his spectacles and put them on again upside down.

"Lord bless us!" he ejaculated.

Then there was a moment's pause, for even Isabel could not rally from such a surprise, but the visitor's face grew harder.

"Are you going to do it?" she sharply demanded.

"Heaven bless us!" ejaculated Mr. Just, "I don't exactly understand. Did you say—a—that—"

"I asked to be taken into the Mission."

"I'm not sure I know who you are," said the old man, who had a terrible suspicion.

"I'm Jake Mulligan's girl!"

Mr. Just was frightened. There is no use of denying it. He was not afraid of the whisky-trader, but he was afraid of his girl. He thought Mulligan the most wicked man living—the only one who was past saving. He was the curse and terror of Oregon; the serpent of the northwestern garden of Eden.

Now, the fact that Mulligan's girl had come there upset the good man.

Isabel, however, had had time to recover herself, and in the sullen, defiant face before her she believed she read the struggle of a mind which had torn itself away from evil associations with an effort and was afraid of being driven out by those whose protection she sought.

She moved forward quickly, but gently, and took Lona's hand. Then she would have kissed her with more than woman's hollow kiss of conventionality, but the visitor shrunk back with a strange sort of fierce alarm.

"No, no!" she said, in a way which stopped Isabel, and confused her for an instant, too.

"I meant no harm," she then said, gently. "I only wished to show you that you were welcome. She is welcome, is she not, Mr. Just?"

"Bless us, yes, yes! As welcome as flowers in May," said the good man overdoing the matter in his anxiety to oblige Miss Gray. "But why has she come?" he more practically added.

"Because I've cast off Jake Mulligan," Lona replied, plucking viciously at the old, red shawl she wore. "I've seen enough of him and his style, and I want to make new friends."

The people she addressed were not blind, and their philanthropic inclinations were somewhat dampened. Her scowling, sullen face, and downcast eyes, were not those of one who sought to lead a better life. Even simple-minded Mr. Just was impressed by this fact, and he looked at her as keenly as one of his nature could.

None of them, however, noticed that Bloodrod had approached and, leaning on his rifle, was an attentive observer of all that occurred.

"Have you quarreled with your father?" Just asked.

"No."

"Does he know you have left him?"

"No."

"Have you thought carefully on the step you are taking?"

"Enough to take it."

"And you wish to leave your father—for how long?"

"Forever!"

"What are your plans for the future?"

"I thought you were here to help those who needed help," exclaimed the girl, breaking abruptly loose from her curt replies. "Do you cross-question people like a lawyer?"

"Enough to be sure they are sincere," was the grave reply, for Just was beginning to realize what it was to take in a Mulligan.

The girl's gaze was raised and fixed upon him with startling if not threatening abruptness, but whatever she would have said was averted by Isabel.

"I am sure she is sincere," declared Miss Gray.

"So am I!" added a new voice, and Luke Bloodrod stepped to Lona's side and took her hand in his, before she could recover from the surprise his appearance gave her.

CHAPTER XV.

BLOODROD IS PERPLEXED.

THERE was another pause, and then Mulligan's girl withdrew her hand from the spy's hold, though without the fierceness which had marked her manners since her arrival at the Mission.

Bloodrod seemed scarcely to heed her action.

"If a voice is needed to certify that Miss Mulligan has a good heart, and is incapable of treachery, I am here to speak," he boldly added, addressing Just.

"Don't!" said Lona, huskily.

"I have met her before, and know whereof I speak," he supplemented.

Mr. Just looked surprised.

"When was this?"

"I was en route here when I saw Mulligan's cabin, and called; and there's no knowing whether a hair would have been left on my head had she not given me the hint to go. I went, and here I am, sound and alive; and I'll help the girl who helped me, by saying she showed a good heart and level head."

Bloodrod spoke blantly, but he looked reassuringly at Lona as though he feared she lacked the courage necessary to go through.

"Your explanation does you credit, Mr. Bloodrod," said Isabel, seeing that Just was still a little dazed, "but I trust we do not demand credentials when any one applies at the Mission. We are here to succor all."

"Right," added Just, "and Miss Mulligan is welcome. The Mission is not large, but there is yet vacant room. You are welcome, my child, and I believe you will never regret the step you have taken."

His manner was as kind as that of a father, but Lona still plucked at her shawl and avoided his gaze.

"I'd like to be tried," she said, "and I'll do what I can here. I can't teach, for I'm not of the kind, but work I can. I don't mind scrubbing."

Isabel took one of the unwilling hands.

"The Indian women do the hard work," she said, "but you can help me with the children, and I am sure we shall be good friends."

"Better try me before you say that," exclaimed Lona. "I'm—well, I'm who I am, and it may be I sha'n't prove all you think."

"Where is your father?" asked Mr. Just, in whose mind the whisky-trader dwelt like a nightmare.

"I don't know. Don't mention him, for I want to forget all I can of the past. I wish I could forget more than I can!"

She spoke vehemently, and Luke Bloodrod pulled his mustache and looked puzzled; and when Isabel took the new convert away the spy walked apart and, gnawing his lips, muttered:

"What the dickens does it mean?"

Every attention was shown Mulligan's girl. Isabel believed she saw in her a sister who had grown to womanhood under darkened circumstances, and had lived a darkened life, and she was anxious to help her on to a peace of mind she knew she could never have felt with Mulligan.

Mr. Just was not so sure he had done right, and he sought Obed Leechcomb, who had been in his room ostensibly writing letters, when Mulligan's girl arrived; but the agent went into an ecstasy and declared that it was a glorious thing, and in beautiful and flowery language he said the "wayward girl" should be snatched from sin like a brand from the burning.

This settled all Mr. Just's doubts.

Isabel kept Lona with her, showed her about the place and did all she could to make her feel easy and at home. If she succeeded, the somber, half-sullen, half-absent expression on the girl's face belied her mind, but Isabel persevered. She was not herself a professor of religion, but she intended to make a true woman of this strange child of the forest, if such a thing was possible.

It was past noon when Bloodrod came to where Lona was standing alone.

"I have been watching for a chance to speak with you," he said, in a low voice.

"Yes," said the girl, nervously, avoiding his gaze.

"Lona, why are you here?"

"You heard me say."

"That you had deserted Jake Mulligan?"

"Yes."

"Anything more?"

"No."

"Look me in the face!"

Her eyes were raised slowly, waveringly, and several seconds passed before her gaze met his. Even then, that gaze wavered.

"Lona, have you told the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?" Bloodrod asked, with a gravity not usual to him.

The eyes dropped again like a flash, and her lips quivered with what seemed a mixture of anger and sorrow.

"You have no right to ask me that!" she warmly exclaimed. "You are not my master nor my judge."

"I am your friend, at least. Heaven knows I would be one," said the metamorphosed Bloodrod. "You raised your voice when it was perilous for you to do so to warn me of danger, and I will never forget. I say, God bless you, and I ask for a chance to be your friend as you were mine."

He would have taken her hand, but she shrank away as though frightened.

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed.

"Hear me! I say I would be your friend and I mean it, but I am sure you have a hidden motive in coming to the Mission. There was that in your face when you applied for admission which convinced me there was something kept back. Will you tell me—a friend—what it was?"

It was the voice of a friend, but Lona showed only the utmost dismay, if not alarm. Had there been a way she might have fled outright, and as it was she looked about to break down.

"Will you tell me?" he repeated.

"There is nothing to tell."

"Lona!"

"Well?"

"Do I look like a man who would go against a girl situated like you?"

"No," she slowly replied.

"Or play the traitor?"

"No."

"Well, can't you trust me?"

"There is nothing to tell!" she cried, with fierce energy. "Why do you talk to me? I tell you there is nothing. Is it so very strange that I have tired of the crime which hemmed me in, and struck out for myself?"

"No, but in that case you would have faced Rufus Just boldly, and met his gaze instead of avoiding it."

Her mood changed, and she stamped her foot on the ground.

"Go away!" she exclaimed. "I have heard enough, and I want no more to do with you. You are ungrateful after what I have done for you. Yet—yet—I would say, once more, beware! Look well to yourself every hour and every minute. Men know why you are in the Columbia country, and they will not be at ease while you are above the sod."

Her outburst had changed Bloodrod to his old self, and he laughed mockingly.

"I dare say that honest man, your father, would be delighted to put me under the sod, but, beautiful as is this region, I'd rather sleep in bed, in Washington City, than in a grave by the Columbia. I decline to die—"

He paused abruptly as Isabel advanced, and the interview ended. The spy left the glade and, under his old resort, the giant tree at its edge, looked back.

"What does it mean?" he muttered. "I could almost swear she is not the woman to come here as the tool of Jake Mulligan, or any other rascal, yet, there's something in the wind; there's something concealed, as I told her. What? How? Why?"

He knit his brows and looked back at the Mission, but his blank expression continued for several minutes. When it vanished, it went as suddenly as though swept away by the dash of a giant hand.

"I have it!" he exclaimed. "Hotspur Hugh!"

He sprung to his feet, looked once more at the Mission, and then set off for the Chinook village. As he might have expected, he did not find Striking Eagle there. Whisky John was alone, doubled up in one corner like an animal, and all the spy's efforts to arouse him proved fruitless. He wished to ask for Hugh, and he rolled him about several times, only desisting when the overpowering smell of whisky convinced him the old Chinook was, indeed, past awakening for the time.

Bestowing a parting kick which was full of disgust, though by no means heavy, he turned and left the shanty.

Then a change passed over Whisky John. One eye unclosed, the second followed suit, the bloated face came up, and then he crept to the door and looked out.

"Aha! aha! aha!" he muttered, in high glee; "just the man; just the man. Dog of a Boston, you shall pay for kicking me!"

Wheeling, he removed a single slab at the

other side of the shanty and shot out in hot haste.

Unsuspecting of this metamorphosis, Bloodrod went on. He did not feel in a mood for returning to the Mission, so he sought the higher land east of Chinook village and went on, idly noticing the grandness of the forest. When he reached the most elevated point he sat down, deciding to kill time for a couple of hours, and then make another effort to find Hugh.

He fell asleep. When he awoke a man sat on a rock a few feet away, looking at him with an evil smile, and the spy grew interested as he recognized Basil St. Cyr.

"Give you good-day, *mon ami*," said the cool Frenchman. "You have been sleeping so sweetly I hated to arouse you, but the fact is I have a little business with you. Are you ready to attend to it?"

CHAPTER XVI.

ST. CYR EMPHASIZES HIS REMARKS.

BLOODROD easily recognized the Frenchman, and as he was not a man to show outward confusion, whatever he might really think, he arose with all the nonchalance in the world.

"Bless my soul, St. Cyr, is it you? I little expected when I went to sleep that I should awake and find you roosting on a stump. However, there you are, *a la* Humpty Dumpty, and that covers the whole ground. Business? If you have any, fire away. I am all attention."

Mr. Bloodrod took a chew of tobacco and settled down on a rock, but Basil St. Cyr lacked the coolness of nerve to talk as a stoic. He slipped from his perch and standing erect, continued with many a gesture:

"Yes, monsieur; I said I had business."

"I thought I heard you."

"To begin with, you are a Boston; I, an employee of the Hudson Bay Company."

"Ay."

"You told Mulligan that you were in Oregon to see the country."

"So I did."

"You have a further motive," said the Frenchman, a look of unmistakable hostility in his dark face.

"Well?"

"Have you not?"

"If you are telling my story, keep right on," coolly returned Bloodrod. "You say I have a motive besides seeing the country. Well?"

"You are here as a spy from the American authorities," said St. Cyr, with a hostile move of his hand.

"You forget that this is American soil, perhaps."

"I forget nothing. I remember that when it was a howling wilderness, trodden only by Indians and wild beasts, the men of the Hudson Bay Fur Company came here and said to the red-men: 'You have a splendid country here. The Columbia is a great river which drains miles and miles of territory; it has many tributaries, and these are stocked with beaver, otter and mink. If you will trap these animals, we will give you a good price for their skins.' The trade was made, and all went well. Both Hudson Bay men and Indians were satisfied.

"Then came the men whom the Indians call the 'Bostons.' I call them Yankees. They wanted a part of the Columbia trade. They could not be kept off, for the soil was a part of the United States, but decency should have kept them from an industry the Hudson Bay men had opened at great labor. But no; the Yankees were as avaricious as rats; they came. From that moment there was trouble. The Yankees cheated the Indians; the Indians hated the Yankees. The Yankees saw the Hudson Bay men preferred over them, and they hated them for it. Now, they want to drive them out of Oregon, so that they shall have no rivals along the Columbia; so that they can cheat the Indians all that is possible. And you are a spy sent by the United States Government to pry into the affairs of the Hudson Bay Company—you, scoundrel!"

The Frenchman had poured out his speech rapidly and bitterly, growing more and more excited as he progressed, and at the end his hot blood carried him entirely away and he stamped madly on the ground.

Bloodrod laughed lightly.

"Bless my soul, Basil, how you pile it up. Why not say that the perfidious, incendiary, diabolical and anthropophagistic American Government has let loose red destruction on the Columbia like the seven plagues on Egypt—or was it the Hottentots, instead of the Egyptians, who were plagued? But to come right down to horse sense, Basil, I'll insinuate that you are not up in the history of the Columbia. Said history may be beiled down thus: The United States let the Hudson Bay combination trap here as a privilege, but when the Hudson Bay got to killing what few American traders tried to do business here, it became time for somebody to go. Question: Ought it to be the owners of the soil, or the trespassers?"

St. Cyr had tried in vain to interrupt this response, which made him very angry, for it tore

his careful argument to pieces and left him champion of a cause both bad and lost.

But it gave him a chance to come by a short road to an end he was seeking by a long one.

"Sacré!" he cried, "do you call me a liar?"

"Not that I am aware of," coolly replied Bloodrod.

"You intimated it."

"Scarcely. My argument showed, rather, that your judgment was warped."

St. Cyr again stamped angrily.

"You seek a quarrel with me!" he cried.

"Basil," said the spy, coolly and carelessly, "you may as well come to the point at once. What do you want? Don't seek for an excuse, but tell me. Unless you do this, you are lost. I decline to take the lead, as you wish, and force a quarrel. So far I can see your hand. Show it all, or retire from the game."

The Frenchman's enthusiasm was dampened, for his purpose had been clearly read, but he would not turn from that purpose. He struck his hand on his sword.

"Do you see this weapon?"

"Ay."

"I have another here. Dare you fight me?"

Bloodrod did not answer at once, but stood looking at his enemy critically.

"Basil, you are rather a sly one. I can't wholly understand you. Why do you take the way you take? Why not set your Hudson Bay cut-throats on me, if I have become too numerous?"

"Mon Dieu, are you mad? This matter is between us two."

"Between your grandfather?" coolly retorted the spy. "Toss that blade here."

St. Cyr had developed a second sword, which was what the American called for. An accomplished swordsman, the son of France had hoped to find a novice in the spy, but the latter's mere touch undid him.

"Where did you learn the art?"

"In Paris," tersely answered Bloodrod; then, as he tested the sword and found it good steel, he more slowly added: "In your country, Basil; the land of the men who hate John Bull, whom you are now serving."

The Frenchman flushed a little. Callous as his nature had become, there were times when he remembered that he had been taught, when a child, to hate the men who lived north of the Channel—the old foes of France.

But he threw off the feeling. He raised his sword.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready," tranquilly replied the spy.

"Is it to be to the death?"

"If you overpower me, yes; if I overpower you, it shall be as I will."

The calm confidence expressed by this speech rather startled St. Cyr for a moment. Then he was himself again, and his white teeth showed as he smiled scornfully.

"Bah! You make empty talk, Monsieur Boston. Here's at you!"

He made the first stroke and the swords rang together sharply. Then the duel began in earnest. Whatever secret motive, if any, actuated St. Cyr, he was clearly in earnest, and he went into the contest with a determination to speedily cut down the spy.

He did not immediately succeed. Opposed to his assault he found a guard he would have admired at any other time. Bloodrod stood firm and cool, and with a pliant wrist turned his sword wherever it was needed. Thrust as St. Cyr would, every effort was neatly foiled; that guard seemed impenetrable.

He paused at last and looked at his adversary with a wavering smile.

"It's a pity you were born outside of France," he said.

"Had I been born inside France, I should not be working for an English corporation."

"Sacré! Why do you speak of that?"

"Your career suggests it."

"Look to yourself, not to me."

"Thanks; I'll not neglect my humble skin."

St. Cyr raised his arm and the fight was resumed. The Frenchman, however, was resolved to end it. He had found a foeman of a kind he did not expect, and as he was the stronger, it was not wise for the Frenchman to protract the combat.

He pressed forward, thrusting with rapidity and giving stout blows, but Bloodrod, never losing his coolness, handled the sword like a veteran. There was no flaw in his guard; despite all his efforts, St. Cyr could not touch him. The fight had become furious, however. They tramped back and forth like gladiators, and the birds cried out and fluttered wildly above at sound of the clashing steel. Even they seemed to know that one relaxation of vigilance on the duelists' part meant a tragedy for the forest glade.

Bloodrod had not let himself out fully, however. He knew his power, and, though St. Cyr was of a race of swordsmen, he believed he could disarm him when he saw fit.

He tried it now.

Assuming the offensive, he forced the Frenchman back with sturdy blows which rang loudly on the other blade, and St. Cyr saw that he was in danger. The eyes before him were as calm and cool as was possible—they were too

cool, in fact—but he noted the added nerve of every blow and suspected what the result would be.

It came.

St. Cyr was beaten to his knee and his sword went flying away, while the other weapon was presented at his breast.

"Yield!" cried the spy.

But even as he spoke, his arms were pinioned to his side, and from the bushes half-a-dozen brutal-looking men appeared, surrounding Bloodrod with a circle of drawn weapons.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPY'S DEATH-SENTENCE.

ONE glance was enough to satisfy Bloodrod as to the kind of company he had fallen among. The new-comers were undoubtedly St. Cyr's followers, men of the Hudson Bay Company, and he was in a deliberately-formed trap. Worse than that, these men suspected that he was in Oregon to investigate their methods, and he was aware that that meant death.

Accordingly, he took little time to think, but made a great effort to break away from the men who held him. In vain; they were there in numbers, and they did not intend he should escape.

But one way was left open to him. His sword was left him. It would be taken away. He must use it while he could, if at all.

He turned the blade and thrust out blindly behind him.

A yell of pain followed.

"Devi's alive! I am killed!" cried a voice.

Bloodrod thrust again.

Another yell followed.

Then he made another effort, and, breaking loose, sprung away and placed his back to a tree.

"Advance at your peril!" he then shouted.

There were no signs of an advance. Seven men were before him—though one was groaning on the ground—but all stood checked for the time by the bold front he presented. They were stout fellows and hard fighters, but only two were Frenchmen. Those of English blood, who were veteran trappers, knew nothing about swords, and the ugly look of the blade Bloodrod held was not lessened by the fact that one of their number was already down and another wounded.

But St. Cyr was furious.

"Sacré!" he cried, "why don't you at him?"

"We don't fight with such weapons," promptly returned one man. "See Bob Corley! He's down with a slit in him, an' we'll go ther same way. You are ther man who fights wi' a sword!"

It was an impudent reply, but St. Cyr did not heed it.

"Bah!" he said, "this will settle him."

He drew a pistol as he spoke, but Bloodrod looked at him unwaveringly.

"Do you mean war to the knife?" he asked.

Had St. Cyr said yes, they would have had "war to the knife." The spy's hand was on his pistol, and he would have turned it upon them and risked all in a hot fight, but, before St. Cyr could speak, another man came forward and claimed attention. He was clearly of St. Cyr's race, and of about the same age, but he lacked a good deal of being as handsome. Once, he might have been more so, but on his face there were marks left by a life of unrestrained dissipation, and his blotched face was almost repulsive.

Yet, when he spoke, his voice was clear—almost musical.

"Give me a word here," he said. "Monsieur Bloodrod, you have done well with the sword. Dare you risk it further?"

"What do you mean?"

"Disarm me as you have disarmed St. Cyr and you may go free."

St. Cyr started forward quickly.

"No!" he cried. "You are not a sword-man—"

"Yet, I choose to meet him. Say no more!"

The man had picked up his comrade's sword and faced Bloodrod, but St. Cyr did not so readily give up.

"Wait!" he said. "I have known you for a year, and have never seen a sword in your hand. You have declined to fence with me. Do you know it means death to go into this fight?"

"I know I am going in," was the rough reply. "Who are you to dictate to me? Jules Lemaire is his own master. American, are you ready?"

Bloodrod had been looking at the speaker with surprise. He saw that he was a man out of the usual order; he suspected that his mental balance was not good; while the idea entered his mind that he was not so much of a villain as was St. Cyr.

Therefore, he now answered:

"I prefer not to fight, monsieur."

"Are you afraid?" sneered Lemaire.

"Scarcely. If you think so, set on these cut-throats."

"You will fight me," was the inexorable reply.

"So be it."

Bloodrod spoke curtly, and, as he did so, put

up his sword. Coolly as he had answered the last question it had gone home, and he resolved to give the Frenchman a lesson. After that—if he won—he might as well go at the other men with a rush, for they certainly meant to take his life.

St. Cyr stood apart and looked at Lemaire with a troubled face, but he said no more.

Lemaire advanced and the swords crossed, and then St. Cyr, who had seen some of the best swordsmen of Paris, was amazed at the skill his fellow-countryman showed. His position, his thrust, his parry—all were perfect; while he gave evidence of having a wrist of surprising power.

All this Bloodrod was learning, too; he was learning that he had met his master. Only one man had he ever seen before who could thus wield a blade, and he was called the best swordsman in Paris.

There was a rattle and crash, and then a shower of leaves fell to the ground as the American's sword went spinning upward. He had been neatly disarmed and was at Lemaire's mercy, for the latter gave him no chance, but held him at the sword's point.

"Surrender?" he said, sternly.

"For what purpose?"

"Because I order it."

"I am a free man, Monsieur Lemaire, not a slave."

"We will talk of that anon. Now, it is surrender or death. Which do you prefer?"

Bloodrod glanced at the other men. St. Cyr had spoken to them and they stood ready with their weapons. Escape was thus made out of the question, and the spy made the best of it and gave himself up. Variable as Lemaire seemed, the notion that he had honorable inclinations was still in the spy's mind, and he decided to trust to him to carry him through. He had already had his own way against St. Cyr, by which it seemed he was the leader there.

But he at once went and sat down under a tree, while St. Cyr saw that the prisoner's hands were bound. He was then placed in charge of the men and Basil, who had been glancing curiously at Lemaire, approached the latter.

"I did not know you were so much of a swordsman, Jules," he said, lightly.

Lemaire raised his eyes, favored his comrade with a long gaze, and then looked silently away.

"You disarmed Bloodrod as I would a boy."

"What of it?" was the curt reply.

"I repeat that I did not before know you to be so fine a swordsman."

Lemaire looked up again, this time frowningly.

"Basil, there are more things in Heaven and earth than you in your simple philosophy dream of," he coldly replied.

"You must have a motive for keeping your secret."

"So I have, and, consequently, I'll keep the secret."

Lemaire arose abruptly and strode away, taking no notice of St. Cyr's call for him to stop. A moment his steps were audible, and then all was silent. St. Cyr looked troubled for a while, and then he broke into a laugh.

"Incomprehensible being!" he muttered; "what freak will he take next? Egad! I'm not sure I have ever got at any understanding of him, and the impression grows upon me that when a man is deranged there is usually a reason for it. What is there in Jules Lemaire's past?"

Ah! Basil St. Cyr, when you know what is in his past, and he knows what is in yours, you may no longer be friends and comrades on the Columbia trail. The moody Frenchman has a story which would surprise you, and fill you with consternation.

Dismissing all thought of him, after a little, St. Cyr went back to where Bloodrod sat among his captors. He had tried their hearts and hands and found them of flint; they were trappers who had followed the forest and run the race of bitter rivalry against the Northwestern Company, and other things, until all the good in their natures was blotted out.

"Bloodrod," said St. Cyr, gravely, "I suppose you knew what a risk you were taking when you came to Oregon to spy on the Hudson Bay men."

"You have yet to prove I came with that object," the American coolly said.

"I have proof enough for my purpose, and as I have already decided what to do with men who come prying around my territory, I know what to do with you."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. At sunset my men shoot you. I dare say you would like to argue the matter, and, possibly, to throw in a few warnings; but I don't care a fig for all you may say. Imagine it said, hold your tongue, say your prayers if you believe in it, and, when the sun goes down, we will shoot you dead. This is no joke, and I advise you to prepare."

At the last word he wheeled and went away. He came there no more. No one came near the prisoner. He was bound to a tree so he could not escape, and he might as well have been in

the midst of many foes. Now and then he addressed the trappers, but no one answered him.

He began to have an uneasy feeling that the sentence would be carried out. Lemaire had not returned, and he could not have his aid, even if he really felt like giving it, while St. Cyr had a reputation for being merciless.

Bloodrod watched the gang as they lounged about the temporary camp, only glancing now and then at the sun. That luminary went slowly down the sky until his last rays fell on the place. Then St. Cyr advanced with a business-like step.

The hour of execution had arrived.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LIKE A PANTHER'S LEAP.

BLOODROD felt that he was in a tight corner, yet—it may have been the firmness of a truly brave nature—it did not seem to him that his last hour had come, and he met St. Cyr's gaze coolly.

"Are you ready?" the Frenchman asked.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

"For what?"

"To die."

"Certainly not."

"Fool! have you neglected the time of preparation I accorded you?" St. Cyr impatiently asked.

"I've spent most of it in trying to induce your men to play you false," coolly announced the prisoner, "but they were mulish enough to refuse."

"So you'll find me mulish enough not to listen to further idle talk. Men, bring him after me!"

He turned abruptly away, and Bloodrod was conducted after him. The prisoner looked in vain for Lemaire, still feeling that peculiar confidence in him. There was, however, no sign of him.

When the party paused it was in a little glade where the sun still cast a long, yellow light. To a tree at the further end the prisoner was tied, and he noticed that a shadow was pushing back the light; that it would rapidly rise, leaving the glade dark. That would be his only requiem.

St. Cyr was resolved not to lose any time, and he ordered his men to stand in a line at the other side. All were there save he whom Bloodrod had wounded the most severely. He, doubled-up and pale, crouched at one side and waited impatiently for the end.

"Are you ready?" once more asked the Frenchman.

"Ready? Of course not; the idea is absurd."

"Why do you demur? When you became a spy you took your life in your own hands. You have only yourself to blame."

"Have I asked for your sympathy?"

"No."

"Well, I shall not. Neither have I anything more to say to you. Better hurry up your butchers, for, as sure as there is a ruling Power above us, I'll make your life a hot one if I get clear. That's all, Basil."

St. Cyr looked at him in wonder. With all his callousness of heart the Frenchman was a brave man, and there was something he admired in this coolness at such a supreme moment. Then he swept the feeling away.

"So be it!"

He walked to his men, each of whom had been looking to his long rifle. There was no pity in their faces.

"Are you ready, messieurs?"

"Ready."

"Then, take aim!"

They raised their rifles and five dark muzzles stared Bloodrod in the face. They were but three rods away and could not miss, yet he looked at them unwaveringly.

"You will fire when I count 'three,'" said St. Cyr, looking again to his men. "One!"

The rifles clicked as the hammers went back.

"Two!"

There was a leap, as light as a panther's, and some one darted into the glade. The sound caused St. Cyr to turn. He saw two vanishing figures. Then the glade was still again, and Luke Bloodrod was gone. But, not far away, hasty footsteps told of a hasty retreat.

"Sacre!" shouted the captain. "After them—pursue! A pound to the man who brings them down!"

"It was Hotspur Hugh, the Will-o'-the-Wisp!" said one of the trappers, hesitatingly.

"I don't care if it was the devil. Pursue! Devils alive, I tell you to pursue!"

The excited leader set the example, and away they went in a body; but the same surprise which had dumfounded them, and enabled Striking Eagle to effect the rescue, had also enabled them to get a very fair start.

They two were running side by side.

"Hugh," said the spy, earnestly, "I owe you another debt."

"Gifts make no debts," the young Indian tersely replied.

"Gratitude does, and I will not forget. But those fellows pursue hotly. What shall we do? I have no weapon, in case we are overtaken."

"Where are they?"

"Left at the camp."

Hotspur looked back; the pursuers were not visible.

"Follow me!" he said, briefly.

He ran along a fallen tree which spanned a narrow ravine. Other trees were there, forming a wide bridge, and over all ran creeping vines. The boy looked at his white friend to be sure he saw him, and then, turning, dropped off the log into the black pit below.

Bloodrod did not hesitate. He had tried the Chinook in the past and knew where he led others might well follow, and he, himself, boldly took the leap. He went down about six feet and found himself in some sort of a place which was nearly as dark as night. With the walls of the ravine on two sides, and the bridge of trees and vines above, a tunnel was formed and daylight had little chance.

"Quiet!" cautioned the voice of Hotspur, near at hand. "The King George dogs are coming. Let them pass on—we are safe here!"

Bloodrod had faith in his prediction, but he would have felt more at ease had he possessed a weapon of some sort. He was resolved not to be taken again. Luck had gone against him before, when Jules Lemaire wielded so skillful a blade, but the Hudson Bay men had shown that they meant murder and must be dealt with accordingly.

The spy crouched low, looking up in the dim light. There was a sound of quick steps, a rush, and a man ran along a log just above.

"Come on!" he cried; "they must not escape us. A good English pound to the man who shoots Bloodrod!"

It was St. Cyr, and the spy gritted his teeth and felt a strong desire to arise and get at the man. It was war to the death between them, and the Frenchman could inspire hate, if not love.

A faint response came from the trappers, and then they hurried across the bridge after their leader.

"Hoolah!" said Striking Eagle, exultantly. "They are like blind men on the trail. They will follow long before they learn that their prey is gone."

"Possibly, but they are likewise liable to turn at bay. Secure as this place seems, it strikes me we had better get away."

"We will go, though the King George dogs would never find us here. They look not above nor below; they look always straight ahead, or shut their eyes and say: 'I do not see the fugitives!'"

The spy indulged in a silent laugh at Hotspur's fancy. Chinook though he was, he had all the spirit of a more warlike race, and he knew how to boast as well as the best of the red-men.

They left the ravine, took the back track, and went toward the camp where Bloodrod's weapons had been left. They had not gone many rods when Hugh stopped and drew his friend behind a tree.

They were just in time to escape observation. Jules Lemaire went past at a slow and absent walk, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent, his thoughts evidently far away.

Bloodrod looked at him with interest. What manner of a man was he? He seemed more like a moody delver in obscure sciences than a rover of the Northwestern woods. He passed on, unconscious of their proximity, and Hugh touched his forehead significantly.

"Crazy?" questioned the spy.

"He is like yonder oak tree touched by death at the top. See! its trunk looks firm and sound, as do its lower branches, but at the top there are brown leaves which tell of decay. So of the Frenchman. He is not crazy, nor is he sound."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes."

"He is St. Cyr's friend."

The boy made a quick gesture.

"There is little love between them. I can read men's hearts enough to tell that Lemaire broods over some old sorrow. What it is, I know not, but I believe we would not see him in the Columbia woods if he was a happier man."

Bloodrod nodded quickly, the theory covering his own like one footprint within another, and he felt renewed interest in the moody Frenchman.

They went on and soon reached the camp, which they found deserted. Even the wounded trapper had disappeared. Bloodrod's weapons were there, however, and he took them and left the place.

He asked Hugh how he had chanced to so opportunely come to his aid, and the boy first hesitated and then confessed that he had accidentally seen enough to know that his father, Whisky John, had set the French leader on somebody's track, and as he suspected whose it was, he followed and succeeded in effecting the rescue by a bold push.

"I am rather glad this has happened," said the spy, "for I can now proceed against St. Cyr without a grain of mercy. I confess I have always had an admiration for the Hudson Bay Fur Company, which has shown such enterprise and bravery in the West, but when they use such an agent as the Frenchman, it is time to nip him in the bud. Is there anything new?"

"No; but Whisky John travels much for the

King George men, and whispers much with the Chinooks and Molacks, and I suspect."

"What?"

"There will be bloodshed along the Columbia."

"In other words, St. Cyr is setting the Indians on to murder the so-called Bostons?"

"The Indians will work, and so will the Banded Brothers of the Giant's Arm, and the Hudson Bay men."

"In brief, they are resolved to clear out the Yankee traders and the Missions. Well, well; perhaps they will."

"Who will prevent them? My brother is but one."

"Suppose United States vessels should arrive at the mouth of the Columbia, with soldiers?"

"The sooner they come, the better," said Hugh, with energy. "When there are black clouds on the sky there are usually storms to follow."

"I am not blind to the fact, Hotspur. If I had men here I would seize St. Cyr at once. I have no men, and, until they come, I am powerless. I shall, however, watch the man closely. For your part, I wish you to look for the lair of the Banded Brothers. Find them if you can. Also, keep watch of the Chinooks and Molacks. Your father has a good deal of influence, and as the Frenchman is working constantly, we may have an Indian war."

"Are you going back to the Mission?" the boy abruptly asked.

"Yes."

"Watch it well. There are evil people there. The daughter of the whisky-trader means no good, and, though his tongue is oily, I doubt the man named Leechcomb. Watch over the Mission, brother, for there are hearts there which are like gold; those of the true friends of the Indians. They of the Mission sleep over the smoldering fire; it is for us, brother, to guard them."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WAY OF MULLIGAN'S GIRL.

A WEEK passed. Outwardly, it was one which contained no event of striking importance, but its inward history was written in plotting, trailing, persecution, vain beating against the bars, mystification and playing at cross-purposes.

Bloodrod was a good deal in the forest, defying all danger from St. Cyr and his men—of whom he had heard nothing more—and searching for the Banded Brothers. He was still ignorant of their lair, however, though Hotspur Hugh had aided him all he could.

When not otherwise busy, the spy stayed at the Mission, where he was always welcome. His opinion of Obed Leechcomb never changed, and there were some half-venomous passages between them, but they kept the peace fairly and, when the agent moved on to the next Mission—or pretended to do so—he was out of the way.

Lona Mulligan was the chief attraction at the Mission, but she was so in the same sense that a circus wonder attracts, rather than that she was a favorite. The latter she could not very well be. The sullen, defiant expression she had brought into the Mission never left her face, and Mr. Just and Isabel never advanced any nearer her heart. They talked to her as true friends, giving the food of kindness rather than the bone of stereotyped advice, but Mulligan's girl remained the same wild, reserved, sullen person she had been when she came there first. Even Isabel, who was womanly tenderness itself, and who never spoke of religion or the dragon, good manners, to her, had never been able to meet her gaze; that variable, fickle gaze that seemed to prefer the ground above all other places; nor had she been more successful in reading her heart.

As for Mr. Just, he was wholly at sea.

"I never saw anything like her. She is as incapable of analysis as is the moon."

"Still," said Isabel, gravely, "I persist in believing she has a good heart."

"If so, what has she done with it? I don't see any sign that it is now about her."

So said Mr. Just in despair, and the fact that it was the only uncharitable thing he had said within twenty years was all the fault of Mulligan's girl.

"She has been brought up in society which has warped her mind; she does not think or act as we do. Yet, I could almost swear she is not wicked. There are times when, even in her most sullen moments, some little deed of good will break out like a gleam of sunshine through a mass of thunder-clouds. I believe there is a grain of remorse troubling her, and it may be she has some time taken a part in her father's schemes which she now sincerely regrets, but cannot forget. But I have faith to believe all will be well in the end."

"I trust it will, my dear" Mr. Just replied.

Bloodrod, too, watched Mulligan's girl when he could, and he, too, failed to understand her as he wished. He never wavered in the belief that she had a secret motive in coming to the Mission, and as his interest in her grew apace, the suspicion troubled him.

After the interrupted interview before re-

corded, it was long before he had another chance to talk with her privately. When the chance came, it was by stopping her in the wood and resolutely barring her way.

"Let me go—I am in haste!" she said, nervously.

"To do what?"

"Miss Gray wants me."

"Miss Gray sent you out, five minutes ago, bidding you take an hour's exercise in the wood. I heard her. Come, Miss Mulligan, why will you persist in avoiding me? Have you ever seen a sign to indicate that I would do you harm?"

"No, no!" she began, quickly, and then as abruptly paused.

"What then?"

The girl looked down and broke a piece of bark in her hands with a sort of fierce energy.

"Lona, you have avoided me because you feared not me, but what I might discover. You feared I might learn why Jake Mulligan sent you to the Mission."

She started, but did not answer.

"Will you look at me?" he quietly asked.

"No," she fiercely replied; "I won't, and I don't want you to look at me. What do you want of Jake Mulligan's girl? Go away, and leave me alone!"

"Is this the girl who warned me of danger when Honest Britton would have lured me to his den?"

"You'll get in worse danger, if you're not careful."

"And would you not care?"

"Why should I care?"

"Because we are good friends, Lona."

He had reared above her, tall, manly, and with that air of power some men have, yet with a droop of his fine head which was not of pride. He now took her hands, as they ground at the bark, and held them despite her struggles.

"Let me go!" she panted, between anger and alarm.

"Why should I? When a girl persists in ignoring her best friends, they ought to make themselves felt somehow. Come, you know I am your friend; you know I have no wish to persecute you; and may my right hand wither when I raise it to do you harm. Is it such a friend as this you repulse?"

His manner was a strange compound of kindness, argument and tenderness, and the rebellious hands ceased to flutter and lay passively in his own; but Lona still looked down and her face did not soften.

"Are we not friends?" he added, as she did not answer.

"Friends! I haven't one in the world!" she cried, bitterly. "I'm Jake Mulligan's girl, and all men and women hate and despise me. I'm an outcast. There's a brand on me, as there was on Cain, but mine is because I was born his daughter. Friends? I never knew one. My mother died before I can remember, and it was he who reared me. I suppose one-third my life is gone, but I never knew in my life what it was to have another woman take my hand in friendship until—until—"

"You saw Isabel Gray."

"Yes."

"Then give her credit—"

"Don't preach!" she broke in, fiercely. "I tell you I am alone. Well, what of it? I'm glad, and I reckon it's nobody else's business!"

Her sudden change to extreme bitterness was without just cause, but it was just that encouraged Bloodrod. He knew she was trying to discourage him. It also opened a chance to say something he was resolved to say.

"Alone, or not, you seem to care enough for Jake Mulligan to come here at his bidding."

Her gaze was raised angrily to his.

"I did not come at his—"

Was it the power of his own gaze, or something else, that made her stop short with the falsehood unspoken, and with her gaze again seeking the ground.

Bloodrod, still holding her hands, bent lower.

"Lona, why did he send you? What evil purpose has he against the Mission? When is the blow to fall? Lona, you have been here and seen these people doing good and helping the wretched Indians; you have seen how kind Isabel and Mr. Just are. Will you stand idly and let Mulligan work his will?"

A shiver ran through her frame.

"Lona, does the scalping-knife and firebrand threaten your dwelling?"

"My God! how should I know?" she cried, almost hysterically.

"Perhaps you don't know, but you suspect Jake Mulligan's motive."

"I would not tell if I knew a thousand times!" she said, with renewed fierceness.

"And this is the girl who saved my life at the whisky-trader's cabin; who has been taken in here and befriended; whom I have regarded as my friend. Lona, I thought better of you than this. I had given you a place near my affections, for, to me, you seemed a true woman despite—"

He paused abruptly. A great liquid drop had fallen on one of his hands as he held hers, and then he raised her head.

Her eyes were wet with tears. One moment he met her gaze—a softened gaze—and then she released her hands forcibly, and, turning, sped away like a deer, nor did she pause until she was within the Mission.

Bloodrod did not pursue. He watched her out of sight, and then looked down at his hand. A tear-drop still remained there. He sighed, and then, leaning against a tree, fell into deep thought. It was long before he stirred. When he did he walked away with his mind still dwelling on the late interview.

"She is a strange and wonderful woman, but I suspect the strangeness arises almost wholly from her life experience. I believe that under the surface lies a true, womanly nature. It was touched to-day, and there is hope that a subsequent interview may make her talk freely. At any rate, I still persist that her heart is good."

As the spy walked he saw Isabel pass him, going east, but he paid no attention to her and she went on in a manner as thoughtful as his own.

She, too, had her troubles. We all have them. But for that she would never have seen wild Oregon. Since her last meeting with Neal Girdley these old shadows of the past haunted her daily, and, mingled with them, was some fear for Girdley. His abrupt departure from the Mission troubled her.

True, he had announced that he would not remain near her; that he would leave the Columbia country, now he knew she was there; but, remembering that he had been wounded and feverish, she often wondered where he really was. Had he reached Astoria safely, or had his feeble strength given out in the forest and left him to perish?

These thoughts were in her mind to-day, but the breaking of a dry stick aroused her and she started and looked up quickly.

Captain St. Cyr stood before her.

CHAPTER XX.

HOTSPUR TAKES THE TRAIL.

THE Frenchman raised his hat with mocking politeness.

"Give you good-day, Miss Dalton-Gray," he said, in the same manner. "This meeting is an unexpected pleasure."

"There is no reason why it should trouble you. I will pass on," she said.

"Not so fast. I want to speak with you."

Isabel stopped and looked at him coldly.

"Unfortunately, the desire is not mutual, but I will listen to you if there is anything new. I supposed we had exhausted all the conversation that could ever pass between us. I thought and hoped so."

"You are bitter."

"Why should I be otherwise? Do you think I so easily forget the past, and your share in it? Your share! I wish I knew it all. How much of my misery do I owe you?"

Her manner was more steady and forceful than usual, though subdued, and St. Cyr felt uneasy in her presence for the first time in his life.

"You owe no part of your misery to me," he declared. "It is true I was there, and that I had a share in many of the melancholy scenes which ended in Ernest Delorme's loss of life. Others were there. If they were as guiltless as I, there would be no reason for you to blame any one."

Isabel had listened coldly, her face clearly showing that she believed no part of his statement.

"Sir," she said, "do not add perjury to your other crimes. Have you forgotten that you boasted to me, before Delorme died, that it was in your power to silence him, and that you would do it if necessary?"

Something like consternation appeared on the Frenchman's face.

"Did I say that?" he muttered.

"Ay. Have you forgotten?"

"I remember now to what you refer, but I trust you do not think I had any reference to poor Delorme's end."

"Poor Delorme?"

"Yes."

"Why do you use the term? He was never your friend in the old days. It never occurred to me before, but I think now that you may have known better how Ernest Delorme died than an honest man should."

"Miss Gray, I assure you that when I said I could silence him I meant only that I knew a secret not to his credit. That was all."

"Until to-day I never suspected you meant anything else, but your anxiety to explain yourself now leads me to wonder if you meant 'silence him' as he was silenced—with the sword!"

Basil St. Cyr laughed, but it was a hollow, forced laugh, and without a shadow of mirth. He acted confused and uneasy, and though he rallied with ready words, there was no feeling in his speech.

"I could laugh at your absurd suspicion were it not of such a nature," he said. "To a Frenchman, however, the dearest thing on earth is his honor. Kill Ernest Delorme? Nonsense! The man was my countryman, a son of *la belle*

France, and though we were not hand-in-glove, I'd never have harmed him. But the subject is too absurd for discussion; let us drop it. I want to speak of Jake Mulligan's girl."

"What of her?" Isabel coldly asked.

"Why is she at the Mission?"

"It is now her home."

"She has left Jake?"

"Yes."

"I heard so. Why?"

"Because she did not wish to remain with him."

St. Cyr scowled, gnawed at his mustache, and then laughed in a way he tried to render careless.

"Mademoiselle, you are like vinegar with me; but as I have started to speak, I am not to be turned from my purpose. I want to advise you to send the Mulligan girl away. You don't know her as well as I do. I've seen her in the past, and I venture to say she will yet have a reputation equal to her father's."

"You are acquainted with him, then."

"Slightly," acknowledged the captain, with a vexed air. "In my official capacity I meet many men. Mulligan I have found useful at times—ornamental, never."

"Indeed!"

St. Cyr felt that the word expressed volumes, and a wolfish look crossed his face.

"You see fit to sneer at me constantly," he said, with a scowl.

"I believe in taking people as I find them."

"Beware that you don't find me more of an enemy than a friend. You are not so situated as to invite my anger. It may or may not be known to you that the Hudson Bay men are the real rulers of the Columbia. They can raise people, or hurl them to destruction. This Mission and its people live by their mercy. I am an officer of the company, and as such I think my good-will worth having."

"I certainly do not invite your ill-will, but you have long known the state of my feelings toward you. Back in the Canadian days I told you I disliked and distrusted you, and I have seen no reason to change my opinion. Your enmity I do not crave, however. Let us part now."

She moved away, and he made no movement to follow, but on his dark face was a look which showed that he was far from being reconciled to her verdict. Still, he folded his arms and let her go without a word.

Unknown to him, he was watched while he watched her, and the same eyes had been near when he was talking with Isabel.

Had he chanced to look upward he would have seen a dark object in the tree-top which, at first view, appeared not unlike a panther. Closer view, however, would have shown it to be a human being lying prone on a limb, and the dark eyes which looked down were those of Hotspur Hugh.

His position seemed a perilous one. He was forty feet above the ground, yet he lay flat on the limb, and without any visible hold, rocked with the movements of the tree as the wind swayed it.

To those who in his younger years had seen him swinging from a forest-tree in a storm—hanging, perhaps, by one foot, and seeming to delight in the war of the elements, the sight was no strange one. Just now, however, he was quiet and motionless, for he had an idea which he wished to test.

St. Cyr did not long remain where he was. Since his frustrated attempt on Bloodrod's life he had been careful not to rashly venture into a vicinity where he was likely to meet him. He read the spy's nerve, and he suspected that he could be as merciless as a tiger when he started.

So the Frenchman turned, set his face toward the east and strode away.

The bushes had not ceased to quiver behind him when Hotspur Hugh slid down from the limb, thence down the parent stem, like a flash, and then he stooped and glided away on the captain's trail.

An hour passed, but still St. Cyr kept on. Once or twice he looked behind him, but it was not because he suspected that he was pursued. When he looked he did not see the light form which glided from tree to tree like a shadow, but Hugh was on the trail and exercising all of his native skill.

Each minute increased his anxiety to follow St. Cyr, undiscovered. The latter's face was toward the Giant's Arm, and it was somewhere along that wild country that the lair of the Banded Brothers was supposed to be.

Whatever object was leading St. Cyr away he knew his course, for, without hesitation, he wound his way through the wood.

When he paused it was on what seemed a slight ridge, and he at once put a small whistle to his lips and blew a soft, tremulous note, whereupon a man stepped from cover and confronted him.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A brother," St. Cyr replied.

"How runs the river?"

"Strong and rough."

"Will there be rain?"

"There are clouds in the sky."

"But none in the glen. Enough, brother; pass on!"

The unknown waved his hand and disappeared from view, while St. Cyr walked on with a swinging step. Not so Hotspur Hugh. He felt that though he knew the pass-word a score of times over, it would not suffice to pass him by the guard.

Then, how was it to be done?

He was not long at fault, but, dropping flat, he began to crawl forward at a point where he would avoid the guard, moving as noiselessly as a serpent. His long antics and mimic war-trails in the forest were now serving him well, and he had no trouble in passing the guard. When this was done he became aware that the adjacent ground descended rapidly, and he began to suspect what would come next.

Creeping a little further he found himself at the top of a bank which was almost perpendicular, but it was so heavily wooded that he could see nothing beyond. He moved to the left and found that the sheer descent continued. At the point where St. Cyr had gone, the guard undoubtedly kept watch and ward.

Consequently, the Will-o'-the-Wisp continued his investigation. Result, he found the sheer wall was on all sides. The valley, which comprised less than three acres, had been rarely garrisoned by nature.

An ordinary spy would have been perplexed. Not so Hotspur Hugh. All along the base of the bank grew trees as straight as the masts of a vessel. Some of them sent their tops above the upper level; others just reached it; but all were smooth and clear.

It was easy enough to gain one of these tops, but, looking down, he could see that the body of each was as smooth as the before-mentioned mast. It seemed impossible to safely descend, and the majority of men would have stopped there.

Not so Hotspur Hugh.

He believed the valley contained that which would interest him, and, having set out to enter, he intended to enter if such a thing was possible, and his monkey-like skill would now come in practical use.

Catching at a limb he went lightly into the tree top, and, from thence, descended quickly as far as the limbs continued. Then the real difficulty began, and Hugh, looking down at the smooth trunk, knew it was no easy matter to descend safely.

A single slip might dash him to pieces eighty feet below.

Still, he did not hesitate, but, coolly wrapping his arms and legs about the trunk, he let go of the branches and his journey was begun.

For about fifteen feet all went well and then the boy, who never ceased watching carefully, came to a halt. A man was visible below, and he was walking directly toward the intruder's own quarter.

Hotspur came to a halt. He dared not reascend, for his movements might bring particles of bark rattling down on the unknown. No, the only way was to cling fast and trust to luck that the man would not look up; so Hugh flattened himself and became an almost shapeless mass, with a pair of keen eyes looking out therefrom.

CHAPTER XXI.

GIRDLEY SPEAKS FREELY.

NINE days have passed since Neal Girdley was conducted to the secret valley by his new friends, and now, with the afternoon sun creeping down the sky, he sits in the cabin in which he was taken, talking with the leader of the party that brought him in.

The latter was a man of middle age, with a great head on a great neck, and a great body above great limbs. He was a miniature Hercules, though not tall. His breadth of shoulders was something remarkable, however. Unlike the average men of remarkable strength, he did not have a look of mere brutality. His face was well-formed, and, at first, one would only discover that he had an iron will; that he seemed born to command; but, anon, a peculiar turn of his eyes revealed low passions well under control and explained that he was no better than the men he commanded.

Of them, more anon.

With this man Neal Girdley was talking freely, for it was the first time since he was brought to the valley that he had been allowed to do so. He had been a sick man, and had not the valley doctor succeeded in breaking his fever he would not so soon have recovered as he had.

The irritation to his wound resulting from his flight from the Mission had made it far more serious than at first, and a pretty little surgical and medical battle was fought and won before Girdley's mind resumed its usual sway.

When the reaction set in he gained rapidly, and now he was seated with the broad-shouldered leader, talking with readiness, and feeling practically well.

The leader, by the way, had introduced himself as Brick Rose, and so we will hereafter call him.

"You need not feel yourself at all indebted to us," Rose was saying, "for I trust we are not

deaf to the calls of humanity. Finding you as we did, I ordered my men to take you in. We have nursed you through all danger, and I'm glad to have saved so bold a young fellow. That's all, Mr. Girdley."

"It's a good deal in this degenerate age," said Girdley, bitterly. "Man's inhumanity to man's is no poetic fancy nowadays, nor woman's either."

"There's truth in that," Rose acknowledged, eying his guest closely.

"Even life is a fraud."

"Well, that's pretty much as we make it."

"As we make it? No, it's as others make it for us."

"Comrade," said Brick Rose, bluffly, "if we let our neighbors cut the cloth, we'll have a coat that wouldn't fit a mule. We must cut and make our own cloth, and let our neighbors go to the—well, to some other place, you know."

"Right!" said Girdley, with energy. "One's best friend will cut his throat."

"In society, comrade, 'tis so. Only in the wild woods, and in free-and-easy bands, do we get true fellowship."

"Meaning in Oregon?"

"Ay, comrade."

"So I thought when I came here, but— Rose, I am half-inclined to give you a sketch of my life, and let you see what a miserable wretch I am. It does one good to confess he has been a fool, if he has sympathetic ears."

"You may rely on me," said Brick, heartily, biding the gleam of satisfaction which crept into his eyes. "I took a fancy to you when I saw you lying there in the forest, and I never go back on a man."

"Then you shall hear my story. My name, as I have told you, is Neal Girdley, and I first saw the light of day in the State of Pennsylvania. I was, however, afflicted with roving inclinations, and, being one of four sons, I could afford to satisfy my desires. It is now five years since I left home and began the life I covet.

"For these years there was nothing that I care to tell here. I had my share of adventure, pleasure, misfortune, and so on, and my experience served to open my eyes and show me that the world was but a hollow sham, and that the only way for a man to pull through successfully was to keep his eyes and ears open and look out for number one.

"Then I arrived in Montreal. I had drifted in aimlessly, but my indifference soon vanished. I met and became well acquainted with a young woman. For lack of a better name, I will call her Belle Dalton. She was a pupil at some sort of a school, commonly called 'The Mission,' and, perhaps, the genesis of Oregon missions—I don't know.

"Now comes my folly. Belle Dalton was a beautiful girl, and I promptly fell in love with her. More than that, she professed to return my affection, and we became lovers. She had a guardian; a man named Obed Leechcomb. Possibly you've heard of him; he is now in the Columbia country. From the first old Leechcomb turned a cold eye upon me, and when, one day, I announced to him that Belle and I had concluded to join fortunes, and that we desired his blessing, the old fellow swelled like a toad and informed me that such a thing was impossible. He forbade my ever addressing the girl again.

"He was rude and insolent to me, and I would repeat what he said only that I wonder now how I bore it so tamely. I ought to have wrung his nose.

"When I informed Belle, a fresh disappointment met me. She advised that we wait patiently for a while. By her father's will some money had been left her, and Leechcomb had been made her guardian until a time which had then nearly arrived. I repeat, her calmness disappointed me, but I yielded to her argument and prepared to wait with what patience I could.

"Then it was that one, Ernest Delorme, appeared on the scene. He was a Frenchman who, with a comrade named Basil St. Cyr, had made Leechcomb's acquaintance and stood high with him. It was Delorme, however, who was the old man's favorite, and I soon perceived that he was a suitor for Belle's hand, with Leechcomb's consent and aid."

Girdley paused for a moment, and Brick Rose, clearing his throat, muttered indistinctly and pushed over a plug of tobacco, as though he deemed the weed an unfailing panacea for broken hearts.

The hunter, however, did not seem to notice it, and after a few moments of moody reflection, he resumed:

"Everything went wrong after that. Delorme, who was not by any means a bad fellow, was deeply in love with Belle, and he pressed his suit zealously. It seemed to me he was always at the Leechcomb house. The latter fact I could have borne had I not perceived that Belle was transferring her so-called affection from me to him. This was altogether too much."

"I spoke to her about it and she talked very plausibly about the easiest way being the best; said Delorme was a gentleman, and that it was

just as well to let Leechcomb think his plans were working well as to bring his anger down on her head. Fool that I was, I thought the last argument a convincing one and resolutely closed my eyes.

"A change was at hand, however.

"One day Belle came to me and said she believed her guardian was deliberately scheming to get her fortune away from her, and when I proposed immediate marriage she promptly agreed and an elopement was planned.

"I carried out my part, and, one dark night, mounted a horse and rode near the Leechcomb house. From this a carriage soon emerged, containing a man and woman. The night was so dark I could see no more, but I made a pre-arranged signal and she returned it.

"The carriage turned toward the suburbs of the city and I followed as closely as I dared, but it was not until the road grew lonely that I ventured to the side of the carriage. When I did so she put out her hand and I pressed it warmly.

"Be of good cheer," I said. "Another mile and we shall reach the church."

"I have no fear while you are near," she answered.

"I noticed, even then, that her voice was husky and strange, but the evening was cold, necessitating a good deal of wrapping, and this with her agitation, was enough to explain the husky inflection.

"Did you have any trouble in passing the guard?" I asked, trying to encourage her by a facetious allusion to Leechcomb.

"No," she replied. "Pierre saw to all that."

"The driver touched his cap, and I understood that he must be the Pierre in question, but the road grew narrow and I was obliged to fall back behind the carriage.

"We finally reached the church and entered. The priest and his assistants were awaiting, and when we entered the lamps were lit. I turned to my companion in the runaway and assisted her to remove her wrap. She made no demur; they were cast off; but when I stooped to touch her lips I recoiled. She was not Belle Dalton, but a girl I dimly remembered having seen once at some place I could not recall as a servant.

"I was dumfounded, but it required only a moment to enlighten me to a certain extent. I pounced upon the girl, whose name was Lona Something-or-other—I forget what—and though she told me five or six lies in succession, I persisted until, by drawing my revolver, I obtained the truth. She had been Belle Dalton's cat's-paw; she had been hired by that infamous woman to play the part she had, to get me out of the way.

"But why was I wanted out of the way? Because the fair and faithful Belle had decided to elope with Ernest Delorme, upon whom old Leechcomb had suddenly frowned, and they were then, it was supposed, on their way to a church, five miles distant.

"When I knew the truth I flung the girl, Lona, from me so violently that she fell to the floor and then, rushing from the church, I sprung on my horse and galloped away in the darkness as though pursued by fiends. I shall never forget that ride. I was mad for vengeance; I was resolved that both Belle and Delorme should pay dearly for their treachery; and with word, and spur, and blow, I forced the horse on and sped across the country like mad. Ah! well, perhaps I was practically mad; I remember that my head had a feeling I never experienced before or since. It was the madness of ardently desired revenge."

CHAPTER XXII.

A FACE AT THE WINDOW.

GIRDLEY paused for several moments and looked somberly at vacancy. Despite the fact that he was telling his story in a cynical vein, it recalled recollections far from pleasant and touched a wound that had never healed.

Brick Rose listened to all with care and eagerness, now and then emphatically nodding the sentiments he did not think prudent to express.

Unknown to either of them, a third person watched as they talked. Three or four feet back from the cabin stood a low tree, and in the branches of this was a slender form which lay so close to the tree, and seemed so lifeless, that it might have been taken for a part of the tree itself.

Yet, it was not. The dark figure was Hotspur Hugh, who had penetrated to the heart of the secret valley, and was thus playing the spy on two important characters. Girdley he recognized as the man he had found wounded in the forest, though what he was doing in the valley he did not know.

To get near enough to listen without being discovered seemed impossible.

In fact, the young Indian was running a good deal of risk, anyway, as he well knew. From the time when, in the tree-top, he would have been discovered had the unknown looked up, he had run a succession of gantlets, but he had passed through all with unfailing skill and good luck.

He had also learned a good deal about the val-

ley which he knew a certain person would be glad to know.

Girdley resumed his narrative:

"My mad ride ended at the church, where I was informed Delorme and Belle Dalton would be married, and I sprung from the horse and strode toward the door. The building stood a hundred feet back from the road, and was surrounded by trees.

"I was striding along under these when I tripped over some object and fell. I remember I uttered a savage exclamation, but with no further pause than was necessary, I arose and hurried on. The church door stood open and there was a light inside. I strode across the threshold, and stood in the midst of a strange scene.

"The priest was there with his assistants, and so were two or three people to me unknown. So, too, was Belle Dalton, but of Ernest Delorme there was no sign.

"When Belle caught sight of me she must have been appalled, and she seemed to think the only way to save herself from danger was to play the hypocrite. She advanced toward me with extended hands, simulating great joy.

"'Thank Heaven! you have come at last!' she said.

"'Wretched woman, do not stain the high name of Heaven by taking it on your lips!' I cried madly, and then I caught her by the arm and buried her back so violently that she would have fallen had not one of the gaping spectators caught her.

"It was on my lips to shout for Delorme, but the priest suddenly spoke, in a horrified voice:

"'Merciful Powers! what does this mean?'

"He was pointing to Belle as he spoke, and, following the direction of his outstretched finger, I saw on her white dress, where I had grasped her, the marks of bloody fingers. I glanced at my hands; they were red with blood—nay, dripping with the fresh, accursed stuff! And there I stood in the midst of the party, dumb with amazement, while they looked at me as though I had been a Cain.

"I don't know what would have occurred next, but just then some of the villagers came rushing in to say that a man was lying dead outside!

"To make a long story short, it was Ernest Delorme, and it was his body over which I had stumbled. He lay flat on his back in the roadway, his ghastly face upturned, his set eyes staring up at the dumb heavens; and through his heart was a long gash which was plainly the work of an assassin.

"Well, well, let me not delay. A man was dead, and there was I, in the church, with my hands red with his life-blood, and fierce and excited in manner. I was arrested, and the last sight I saw was women working over Belle—she had swooned.

"They tried to hang me, Rose, and they made out quite a case. Belle Dalton lay ill at home with a brain fever, but Obed Leechcomb appeared and testified that I was a discarded suitor—that I had threatened Delorme's life, and he placed in evidence a paper in which Delorme asked Belle to elope with him. This evidence made it seem clear that I had killed the Frenchman through jealousy, and Basil St. Cyr testified that I had asked him to teach me the art of swordsmanship—a fact, though I had done it carelessly, and had never taken a lesson. But Delorme had been killed with a sword, and the prosecution made much of it.

"I bad at first refused to have a lawyer, for I was in a reckless mood. When one was assigned me, he insisted that the trial should be postponed until Belle Dalton was sufficiently recovered to testify. Then I made a sensation by arising and demanding an immediate trial.

"My wish was granted—I have always thought the money of Obed Leechcomb influenced the matter—and the case was rushed through. But it went against those who hoped to see me hanged. We presented two witnesses who testified that they were near the church when I rode up, and that they saw me go directly inside, as well as that they noticed the dark object on the ground before I arrived. Other little points went against the prosecution, and I was acquitted.

"I suppose you will think me a fool, but I was weak enough to call on Belle when she recovered. I went to see if there was a chance for peace between us, but there was not. She tried to lay all the blame at my door, and, when we quarreled, said she thought we were not designed by nature for each other. I thought so, too, and we separated.

"Such is the story of my disgust with the world and its people, and you must confess I have been used badly enough. However, I am well satisfied. I'm done with all nonsense and sentiment, and from this time out I intend to care only for myself."

Girdley tossed off a glass of some kind of suspicious-looking liquor and tried to look as reckless as he could, and Brick Rose again nodded emphatically.

"Right you are, Gird, and I can clasp hands with you on it with zeal. I, too, have had my share of rough knocks; I don't love the world

one whit better than you do. In fact, I've wholly soured on it, and I'm now living a happy-go-lucky life. So are the rest of my men. We're not wicked, but we ain't so confounded sentimental that we can't look out for ourselves."

"That's right," said Girdley.

"Pity you ain't one of us."

"Haven't you room for new recruits?"

"Well, yes, if they want to come in and are good men."

"Could you class me as a good man?"

"Are you serious, Gird?"

"I am."

"Then, by George, give us your hand!"

Brick Rose leaned forward and the two clasped hands, but, before more had been said, Rose bounded to his feet and caught up the rifle which stood near at hand.

"What is it?" Girdley demanded.

"A face at the window. I'll—"

The rest of the sentence was lost as he shot through the door, but Girdley had read his face well enough to suspect what the sentence would have been if finished. He followed as fast as his strength would allow, but as he crossed the threshold, the report of a rifle rung out with startling clearness.

Girdley was startled, to say the least, for he could not imagine what emergency had arisen which should demand such extreme measures as had been adopted, but as he passed the door he perceived that Rose had not fired at a man, as he thought, but to arouse the men of the valley.

They came out quickly, and in a moment more were hurrying up the valley at Rose's motion, in pursuit of the light figure which headed the line.

The latter looked around, waved his hand and sent back a defiant yell which was like a war-whoop.

"An Indian!" muttered Brick Rose, whose face was troubled. "Who and what is he? He was no acquaintance of mine; I know that because I saw him at the window. An Indian, and yet—and yet—"

"What did you say?" asked Girdley.

"Nothing."

The dark leader stood silent for a moment, fingering his rifle as though he would crush the barrel, and then he again turned to his guest.

"Stay you here, Gird, for I must look to this matter. Stay here!"

At the last word he darted away toward the west, running rapidly and keeping his keen eyes always busy.

"He can't hide in the valley, and he can't get out without the hardest climb on record. And when he climbs, I shoot!"

In the meanwhile a lithe figure was shooting along toward the high bluff—the figure of Hotspur Hugh. He was closely pursued, but he looked around with a face full of bravery and defiance, and sent back a whoop.

"Hoorah!" he cried. "The Brothers of the Giant Arm are as weak as squaws. I defy them; I put my foot on them!"

It was brave talk, yet they were hemming the young Indian in on all sides. Capture seemed inevitable, and he had ample reason to believe capture meant death. Still, he did not falter, and he sent back another yell as derisively as though he were a Tecumseh with many men at his back.

Brick Rose, panting and almost breathless, reached a place by the bluff where he felt sure the fugitive would come, and he looked to his rifle with a grim and terrible smile on his broad face.

"He looks like a kid, but no human being can come spying on the Banded Brothers and go away alive. Gods! I'll bore him to the heart!"

Brave Striking Eagle was getting into even closer corners, but he suddenly turned to the right and sprung at a tree like a panther. It was a tall, slender tree which arose to the very top of the bluff, yet not one of the Banded Brothers could have climbed it. That the fugitive should attempt it surprised them.

It also angered Brick Rose. Hugh was climbing with his back away from him, and only his fast-moving hands and feet visible, and the grim leader could not get the shot he desired.

He arose and ran toward him.

"I'll bore him through! No man spies on the Brothers and lives. I'll shoot him through the heart!"

But Hotspur was going up at wonderful speed. One seeing him then, and knowing the climber, would have seen one reason why he was called by his sobriquet. Such a climber was wonderful, indeed.

While he went he kept his wits about him, and he saw the black-bearded man who was running forward with a rifle. He saw that in that quarter lay his danger, and he was exerting every nerve to escape him.

But Brick Rose, seeing him nearing the top, dropped on one knee, took aim and pulled the trigger. A dull click followed, but no report. The rifle, hastily reloaded, had missed fire.

Then Hotspur Hugh raised himself on the lower limbs of the tree, made a long leap and disappeared from view. He was safe at the top of the bluff.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MAN UNDER THE BED.

LONA MULLIGAN stood at the edge of the forest, leaning against a tree, over one limb of which her arm was flung, looking moodily at the Mission. Smiles had never been frequent visitors to her face, but since her coming to the Mission she had been unusually morose and sullen.

When she was with her miserable father she was generally termed a "right smart gal" by his rough guests. This was because her tongue never stammered over a reply when one was needed to their rude banter; her power of repartee both delighted and overwhelmed them.

Since beginning her new life she had given no evidence of ready wit, and had not Isabel and Mr. Just been sincerely anxious to make a true woman of her, the daily sight of her dark, forbidding face, together with her sullen manner, would have caused them to give her up entirely.

Now, standing there in the forest with no eyes upon her, as she thought, her expression was far from light and happy. What did it really reveal? There was no sign of hatred, nor of anger; she did not look at the Mission as an avenger might look.

No. Rather was it fierce sorrow which was shown on her face. The humble Mission had about the same air of peaceful, vague and pastoral repose which clusters around a country church; but it was like a sting to Mulligan's girl.

"I wish I were dead!" she muttered, fiercely, through her strong, white teeth. "What am I alive for? I'm no good to myself, and I'm a curse to them."

She looked again at the Mission, and then with a sudden, passionate movement, flung her other arm over the limb and buried her face between the two.

"It's killing me!" she said, with a sob such as a tigress might make over her young which were dead. "It's killing my heart, but I can't die. I wish I could!"

Poor Lona! Child of nature—Mulligan's girl—the thorns which others let grow in your nature are now touching your heart like a serpent's sting.

There was a light touch on her dress, and she started and looked down. The face of Luke Bloodrod had floated in fancy before her, but when she looked she saw only Blue Jay, alias Nellie, the Chinook child.

The latter was looking at her with sad, sympathetic eyes, in which were shadows deeper yet.

"I'm sorry you are not happy," said the child.

A fierce reply trembled on Lona's lips, but she checked it in time. The youth of the speaker saved her that.

"How do you know I am not happy?" she slowly asked.

"Because you moan like the Chinooks when they have the fever," was the ready reply.

"My fever is in my heart."

"That must be hard to doctor," said Nellie, with childish solemnity. "Have you told Sister?"

Lona remembered that as the last name applied to Isabel, and she at once took alarm. For the first time since her coming to the Mission she exerted herself to carry a point, and as a result, Nellie was soon made to forget, for the time, at least, that she had found Mulligan's girl moaning "like the Chinooks when they have the fever."

But Lona could never forget that she was miserable, and when she returned to the house her face was as dark as ever.

She retired to her room at an unusually early hour and sat down to think. Her mind was all on one point, and she expressed in five words—"Shall I leave the Mission?"

She was still considering the matter when a sound at the window caused her to turn, and as she looked around, a man's face arose to view and a hand waved a warning message to her. She sat like one frozen, for she had recognized the face; it was that of Jake Mulligan.

He made another gesture, and then his body arose to where his head had been and he slowly drew himself through the window and stood in her room.

Lona gazed at him as though she beheld the arch enemy of man, but a smile stole slowly over the whisky-trader's face, like the playfulness of a bull-dog. He seldom smiled at his daughter in that way, but they had never been placed just like that before. Wily Mulligan did not feel sure but she would give the alarm and betray him, and he was prepared to act the affectionate father until he was out of danger.

"Didn't expect me, did ye?" he said, still grinning.

"Great heavens! why are you here?" she cried, in a husky whisper. "Go away, go away!"

"What fur? I've come fur ter see you."

"But you'll be discovered—the people will see you—"

"Oh! no, they won't; I'm no such slouch ez that. I took good care ter come in soft an' slow. Nobody see'd me; nobody knows I'm

hyar; an' you an' me kin hav a nice leetle talk tergether, ye know."

The bull-dog had never been more amiable, and he sidled into a chair and, looking at Lona, rubbed his hands and looked very amiable.

The girl drew a deep breath and returned his gaze sharply. Her first alarm past, she was hardening as Mulligan's girl had hardened before.

"What have you to say?"

"Is that aught that's new?"

"No."

"Old Just an' ther Gray gal is jest ther same?"

"Yes."

"An' ther man, Bloodrod?"

"What of him?"

"Jest what I want ter know. What o' him? What's he doin'? How fur inter ther rock hez he poked that pryin' nose o' hist—cuss him!"

Mulligan's grin vanished, and he clinched his hands as though he had the throat of an enemy in his grasp. He hated Bloodrod with a bitter hatred, and, strangely enough, not more because of his errand to the Columbia than because he had called him an honest man repeatedly and scoffingly.

"I do not know more about Mr. Bloodrod than that he goes and comes as usual," said Lona, slowly. "He never refers to his business when I'm around."

"Then that's ra'aly nothin' new?"

"Nothing new."

"Wal, I reckon that won't be, an' I've come ter tell ye you may go hum ter-morrer."

How that dusky face changed then! The sullenness, the doubt, the worry and the troubled air were gone. Joy shone in her face, and she breathed two words.

"Thank Heaven!"

Mulligan looked at her curiously.

"Do you ra'aly hate hyar so much?"

"Yes."

"Wal, you kin go away. Tell 'em you pine fur ther old, free life, an' can't b'ar ter be shet up like a—like a crow, or some such metalphor—you kin sling it in. Your boat shall be at the Three Pines at dawn an' you kin suit yerself fur time. I'll wait fur ye at ther cabin."

Father and daughter continued to talk somewhat further, but a light rap at the door brought Lona to her feet with a paling face.

"It is Isabel!" she said, in terror.

Mulligan looked quickly around, and then another grin passed over his brutal face.

"Let her in," he said, and with a quick, almost noiseless movement, he crawled under the bed and disappeared from view.

Lona was filled with fear and consternation, but, as the rap again sounded at the door, she seemed to have no choice, so she forced herself to be as calm as possible and moved toward the door.

She opened it, and Isabel entered with her usual gentle manner.

"I thought I would come in and talk with you a little while before retiring, Lona," she said, smiling.

"You're kind, miss," replied Mulligan's girl, her unusual politeness due to the fact that she dared not be otherwise, lest she should arouse Isabel's suspicions.

The two girls sat down opposite each other.

"Are you beginning to feel at home in the Mission?" kindly continued the teacher.

Lona hesitated.

"I can't do that in a day," she evasively answered. "I've been an out-door girl, you know, and this is a great change for me."

"I trust you are not sorry you came to us?"

"No, no; I am not."

"You will feel more at ease each day. When our ways become a habit to you, you will grow contented and happy. We want to make you so. If anything occurs to you which we can do, do not neglect to tell us."

Lona's eyes filled with tears.

"You're very kind, miss."

"We are interested in you, Lona, and anxious to help you forward. We believe you will become a noble woman in time."

"I shall if I follow your example. You lead me, not drive me. You give an example, not a rule."

"Mr. Just is a Christian, but his way, as you express it, is to lead, not drive. As for me, I am not here as a missionary, in its full sense. Being one of the world's people, I am a teacher, and nothing more. But, though not a missionary, I trust I am able to help a sister when she is in need."

"So you do, miss; so you do."

The shadow of her impending departure from the Mission was over Lona, and it softened her. She had learned to love Isabel, though she bid that love, and it was a bitter feeling to suspect that she would soon be known in a light which would make the teacher condemn and despise her. All this touched her, but there was a restless stir under the bed, unnoticed by Isabel, and Mulligan's girl knew her father was writhing under this conversation.

The danger that he would spring out from his ambush checked the flow of her better feelings, and from that time Isabel could not see that she made any impression, the old, somber look

returned to Lona's face, and she so plainly showed her desire to be alone that the teacher decided not to trouble her longer.

She arose with a sigh, and then noticed the open north window for the first time.

"You had better close it before you retire," she said. "It looks out toward the hospital, and there are two cases of fever there."

Lona ungraciously replied that she was not afraid of the fever, but would close the window, and then Isabel kissed her good-night at the door and went away.

Jake Mulligan came out from his ambush and looked after her with wolfish eyes.

"Zounds! she's a good 'un!" he observed. "I'd give a good bit ter hav her lips pressed ter mine like that, but ye shrunk away ez though she was p'izen. Euh! gals don't know skeerely anything!"

"She's too good for you!" sharply replied Lona.

"Hoity-toity! what's broke loose now? Keep yer opinions ter yerself, will ye? Ef I see fit ter admire her, I'm a goin' ter do it. You mark that down, will ye? Mehbe she'll be yer stepmother one o' these days. But we won't quarrel. Do ye come ter ther cabin ter-morrer, or bang 'round here?"

"I leave here," was the quick reply.

"Good! You'll find yer heat whar I said. Come home; I'll be glad ter hav yer apt hand at ther kettle an' spider ag'in. I'm off now. Yas, close ther winder an' keep out ther fever. Lord bless that lump o' sweetness, she's raised a fever in my buzzum for which that's only one cure—herself. I'll see her ag'in, I will!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SUSPICIOUS ARRIVAL.

LUKE BLOODROD entered the main building of the collection generally termed the "Mission" and looked around, but no one was visible. So he went out and walked to the cabin known as the Hospital. There he found Mr. Just wrestling with a fever which was trying to carry a homely Chinook to the happy hunting-ground.

Not feeling interested, Bloodrod walked to the third cabin, which was called the School-House.

"I shall find Miss Gray, at least, here," he said.

He stepped to the door and then paused. The school was in session. Six Chinook children, including Nellie, alias Blue Jay, the sister of Hotspur Hugh, were there; homely children, with natural heads, and repulsive children with heads missshapen by the custom of their race.

With these the three women teachers of the Mission were busy, but Bloodrod looked only at Isabel Gray. He had come to think her a miracle of womanly grace, sweetness and patience. Right here let us say that this opinion was disinterested; he realized what it was for any woman, especially a young one, to leave the civilized world and live the life she was leading.

Any school-room is dull for the casual observer, but he found this one unusually so, and, turning away, he walked further about the place. His air was not aimless, and that he had an object was shown by the fact that he accompanied Isabel as she left her school-room.

"How is the seminary to day, Miss Gray?"

"Quite prosperous, sir."

"And the future Pontiacs?—excuse me, I mean George Washingtons?"

"They are dangerous to quarrel with," she replied, smiling.

"Then, I'll steer clear. By the way, where is the Mulligan girl?" he carelessly added.

"Gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Home. She came to me this morning and said that she had decided that our ways were not hers, and that she felt that she could never adapt herself to them, adding that she was going to return to her father."

"And you let her go?" sharply demanded Bloodrod.

"What could I do?" asked Isabel, plainly annoyed.

"You could have talked with her as one woman should with another whose feet tread the verge of destruction. She was not beyond saving."

Isabel looked more grieved than offended, but she replied with dignity:

"Mr. Bloodrod, you have spoken in a manner which, I am sure, will cause you regret when you have reflected fully. You must be aware that I have labored earnestly with Lona, and mature thought will convince you that I would not let her go back to Jake Mulligan without doing my utmost to prevent it."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Gray; I am already convinced of my mistake. I have made a fool of myself, and I am sincerely ashamed. If you can forgive me—"

"I do," Isabel replied, promptly, with her gracious womanly manner. "I know your mistake arose from your interest in Lona, whom you met before the rest of us. Let us speak only of her."

And then the teacher proceeded to tell how Mulligan's girl had come to her and abruptly announced that she was going away, and how she had gone with almost equal abruptness. Isabel had done her best, but the girl was not to be turned from her purpose. She went. One idea, however, was strong in Isabel's mind: Lona had not gone with any great amount of joy. On the contrary, when she said good-by, she burst into fierce tears and then fairly ran away and entered the boat she had already brought to the bank opposite the Mission.

Bloodrod listened and answered, but only half of his attention was with the speaker. One-half his mind was following Lona.

What was the meaning of her abrupt departure? He felt sure she had come to the Mission at Mulligan's bidding. Now, he was almost equally positive she had left at the whisky-trader's bidding. Her manner of going was, under the circumstances, characteristic. She had come against her will, the spy argued, and the part she was to act had caused her keen remorse. The summons to leave was in one sense of the word welcome, but Isabel's kindness had touched her heart and the fountain of tears overflowed at parting.

But why had she gone? What charge had Mulligan made in his plans that she was recalled?

Suddenly the spy wheeled upon Isabel.

"How long has she been gone?"

"Two hours."

"By boat, you said?"

"Yes."

"Then, good-by!"

Bloodrod, whom the teacher had considered proof against excitement, turned and strode toward the wood, his face cast—toward Jake Mulligan's cabin. Isabel called to him, but, without an answer, he kept on and the bushes soon opened and closed behind him. Once out of sight, he broke into a run.

"I may yet overtake her!" he muttered.

It was taking one hope in a hundred, but he was in earnest and not to be discouraged. He would have given much for Hotspur Hugh and his canoe then, but he had to rely on his own limbs. Luckily, they were strong, and with a prayer that he might overtake Lona he sped along the bank breathlessly.

His labor was in vain, and, at last, he stood staring at the whisky-trader's cabin, undecided whether to advance or not. There was no sign of life about the place and he suspected all the family had gone. If Mulligan was there, there was no knowing how he would be received.

His indecision vanished as, looking down, he saw a small footprint in the earth; Lona's, beyond a doubt, and fresh.

That decided him, and he strode forward toward the cabin boldly. His knock was soon sounding at the door. The first attempt convinced him the place was not vacant, and the second brought the whisky-trader into view.

A more astonished man than the one-time "Brittles" it would have been hard to find then.

"Hallo, honest man," said Bloodrod, with the old happy-go-lucky manner, and the same suspicion of rascality clinging about him which first moved Brittles so deeply. "How do you do, Brittles?"

"So it's you, curse you!" growled Mulligan.

"It's I, and delighted to see you. How are you? How is your charming daughter? How is jolly Brimstone Jake?"

The spy had pushed across the threshold while asking, and, though Lona was not visible, the form of the person he last named was visible in a chair, his face as sleepy as usual. He heard his name called, however, and replied like a soldier at roll-call.

"Hyar I be, an' I'm a Roarer!"

"You shut up!" growled Mulligan. "Turn on yer snore-valve an' say less. Critter, what ther blazes brung you hyar?"

"My pedal conveyance, honest man."

"You're mighty smart, ain't ye?" and the whisky trader glanced toward his rifle.

"Now, don't, Honest Brittles, don't. Some day your fancy for villainous saltpeter will get you into a muss. Curbit! Where's your daughter?"

The two men looked at each other; Mulligan, ugly and ferocious, and Bloodrod as cool and unconcerned as he usually was in such cases.

"None o' yer business!" snarled Mulligan.

"May I call ber?"

"You may do ez you durned please."

Bloodrod waited for no more. He called once, twice, three times, and then the twinkle in the whisky-trader's eyes satisfied him he was wasting his breath. He labored with the man for awhile, and then, convinced that nothing was to be learned, took his departure. Brimstone Jake aroused and observed that he was a Roarer, but Bloodrod had more respect for the warlike abilities of a man who said less, and took good care to give Mulligan no chance at him.

When he reached the river he found a strange boat rocking by the bank, but both Mulligan's and Lona's were invisible. He was tempted to appropriate it, believing it the property of some of the whisky-trader's friends, but he decided

not to meddle with what was not his and set off on foot for the Mission.

As much as he wished to find Lona, he believed his best way was to get back to the other point, and, from there, to go in search of Hotspur Hugh.

When he reached the Mission, the first person he saw was a stranger in conversation with Rufus Just; a young man who certainly could not be said to be of a sinister type, but at whom the spy looked with surprise.

He at once sought Isabel and reported the result of his journey, but he did not long give her time to wonder what had become of Lona. He mentioned the stranger outside. Who was he?

"His name is Neal Girdley," she replied, steadily.

"Do you know him?"

"He was here a few days before you came, and was treated for a flesh-wound."

"Is that all you know about him?"

Isabel thought she had but one answer to give

"Yes."

"Why is he here now?"

"He is ill and weak, and Mr. Just has asked him to remain for awhile and recuperate."

Bloodrod frowned.

"I don't like him."

"Don't like him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I can't tell. His face don't seem to be a bad one. Neal Girdley! Where have I heard the name? I'll consider the matter anon; just now I am going to look for an ally to find Lona—Miss Mulligan. I refer to the brother of your pet pupil; the wayward young Indian usually called Hotspur Hugh."

The spy shouldered his rifle and, with another look at Girdley and Just, strode away toward the Chinook village.

"I don't believe in presentiments," he muttered, "but the idea is strong within me that that fellow means mischief. Remote, weak Mission! your sky is overcast when such men as Leechcomb prowl around and Jake Mulligan gets his evil eye on you!"

Within an hour Bloodrod had seen Striking Eagle, who told him of his narrow escape from the Banded Brothers' valley, and a comparison of notes showed them that the man the young Indian had seen talking with Brick Rose in the cabin was the same as he who was now at the Mission as an honored guest.

"I thought as much," the spy declared. "I read mischief afoot the moment I saw him; he means no good to the Mission. Others are down on it; Mulligan, Brick Rose, Naika, the Molack, and others too numerous to mention. There's a cloud on the horizon I don't like, and, unless you and I work well, Striking Eagle, some morning sun will find only a mass of ruins where now stands the Mission!"

CHAPTER XXV.

A GRAPPLE IN THE WATER.

STRIKING EAGLE smote himself dramatically on the breast.

"The King George men are dogs!" he said. "Why should they war on old men, on women and children, such as are in the Mission?"

"Why?" repeated Bloodrod, scornfully. "Because they know these feeble people will sooner or later throw light on their dark deeds, and then they will lose all hold on the Columbia country. There is much said about your people, Indian, being so well satisfied with their trading with the Hudson Bay men. Why are they satisfied? Because they do not see that the gaudy finery they receive is really mere trash. As the Missions do their work, this will become clear. Then the Hudson Bay Company will lose its hold."

"And so they will fight now, with knife and rifle, and try to sweep the Bostons off the earth."

"The company has much to answer for," said the spy, musingly. "It is not likely they know one-half of the deeds of the agents, like St. Cyr, but it is a most confounded blind employer who sees nothing."

"The King George men are dogs," again asserted the Will o' the-Wisp. "If the Chinooks had the courage of men, Striking Eagle would talk plainly to them and put them on the war-path against the King Georges."

"Unluckily, more than one voice is needed to turn them. Some of them, like your father, Whisky John, are ready to fight against the Mission people. So are the Molacks; so are the Banded Brothers; so are the wild trappers from the British territory."

Bloodrod was covering the ground carefully, but the more he talked the more it became clear that the situation was serious.

He had come to Hugh with a fixed purpose, and he proceeded to explain it.

"Are you ready to take a journey for me?"

"Ugh! Tell me what it is and I will go at once."

"There is a man at Astoria who is waiting for a word from me. To him I wish you to bear this paper, which will tell him what I want done. Were you a common messenger I should

say no more, but you have proved your faithfulness often and well!"

"I behold my brother!" said the Chinook, gravely, as he laid one hand on the spy's arm.

"Good. I was sure your heart was in the right place, Striking Eagle, and I have trusted you well. But about the men at Astoria. They are there awaiting my orders, and, on receipt of this paper, they will come secretly to this vicinity and we shall boldly oppose St. Cyr and his men. The time is come when the ownership of Oregon must be settled."

Unconsciously, Bloodrod raised his voice at the last sentence; he raised it so much that men who were hovering near and trying to hear more overheard that much.

Darkness was falling around Bloodrod and his friend, and these men, skulking in the bushes, were not visible. The shadows of night were covering their evil deeds as it has covered a multitude before.

"Are the men at Astoria soldiers?" Hugh asked.

"No. They are men who have trapped with me along many a river between here and Lake Michigan. I am not so much of an out-and-out agent of the United States as is supposed. The Government dislikes to send soldiers to Oregon, nor do they think it necessary. But they have sent me here to investigate, and the men at Astoria only wait my word."

"Give it, and sweep the black man they call St. Cyr away," said Hugh, earnestly.

"It shall come. St. Cyr is a scoundrel, and the Northwest must be rid of his presence."

"It is good—much good!" and Hugh nodded several times in succession.

Having received his instruction, and the note, he was anxious to be off, and Bloodrod walked with him to the river's bank. There, the Chinook's canoe was concealed under the bushes, while, not far distant, were the two boats belonging to the Mission.

The fancy seized Bloodrod to take the smaller of these boats and accompany his messenger a short distance on his way, and they rowed out side by side.

The darkness had barely swallowed them up when four dark forms stode to the larger boat, cut it loose, entered and rowed after the smaller crafts. All of these men were Chinook Indians, and at their head was Whisky John.

"Quiet, quiet, quiet!" said the latter, in his native tongue. "The ears of Striking Eagle are keen, and if he bears us all is lost. Let him go away, and then we will kill the Boston."

The other Indians answered with several guttural sounds which showed them in accord with their leader.

"We shall be well paid," continued the vagabond, with a chuckle. "Hoolah! we shall have much whisky!"

"Whisky good," said one of his comrades.

"Don't I know it?" asked John, sternly.

"Haven't I tried it? What one of you can tell anything about whisky? Bah! I can drink you all under the table!"

With this peculiarly American assertion Whisky John effectually disposed of his companion, and the boat floated on in pursuit of the others. The fact that the Chinook vagabond led the party did not hide the fact that mischief was afloat. Old John was as big a rascal as walked the soil of Oregon, although a cowardly one, and he could be hired to commit any crime.

Bloodrod accompanied Hugh well out on the river, and then they shook hands and separated.

The spy rode back in a thoughtful mood. He was greatly troubled by the situation along the river. There was no longer a question as to whether trouble was afloat; the only question was, how soon would the blow fall? Bloodrod hoped not until Hotspur Hugh had brought help from Astoria, but he had grave fears.

What could he do to avert the impending blow? This was the question most in his mind, but he seemed helpless. He could not move Mulligan from his purpose; he could not move St. Cyr, nor Brick Rose, nor Naika and his wild Molacks.

"There must be some preparations made at the Mission—and yet, who would fight? Just is too old, and I even doubt if he would raise a hand; and Girdley is more likely to betray than save. Unlucky Mission! what is to become of you?"

If Bloodrod had been less occupied with his thoughts he would have been better off. As it was, he did not see the other boat which hovered near and then, getting under full speed, came shooting down upon him like a hawk. Strangely deaf he was to the sound of oars—

Hal he heard it at last. Looking around he saw the boat, while the same glance convinced him that it would be folly to try to avoid it.

He saw, too, that its occupants were Indians, and a realization of his danger flashed upon him.

"Back, there!" he shouted. "I'll shoot to kill if you come nearer!"

The only reply was the flash and report of a huge pistol in Whisky John's hands, and a bullet went whizzing past the spy's head.

That removed his last doubt. The other craft was almost upon him; in a moment more there would be a collision. He saw the danger and the preventative.

His own pistol came up quickly and he aimed as well as he could in the darkness. He fired. A muffled cry of pain followed, and the other boat, deprived of one oar, lost impetus and accuracy, and, instead of crashing into the small one as intended, swept past to leeward with one oarsman lying dead across the seat.

"Hoolah!" cried Whisky John, in a wild screech, "the accursed Boston has slain his brother. Kill him! kill the thief of a Boston!"

Bloodrod had a fair chance for flight, but his blood was up and he did not think of it. He was bound to make the men who had attacked him repent, and he went about it straightway.

His boat was still drifting in the course the other had accidentally taken, and he caught at the oars and pulled down on them with all his power.

"Here's at you, dogs!" he shouted. "I'll carve you in pieces!"

The Chinooks were never warriors; they had a profound fear for all white men; and when Whisky John and his friends saw their danger they wilted at once. There were several frightened cries and three splashes, and then their boat was vacant and the late occupants struggling in the water.

Old John was the last to go, and as he went over the boat's edge he looked up and saw what he believed to be a demon hovering above him. Really, it was Bloodrod, and in a moment more his hands closed upon the Indian's hair and stopped his retreat; then with a powerful effort he landed the fellow in the boat.

"Oh! oh! oh!" groaned John, in the most approved English style, but with a species of alarm peculiarly his own. "Let me go! I ain't done anything. Let me go!"

"My Christian friend," said Bloodrod coolly, as he recognized his prisoner and saw what was his mental state, "if you don't stop that infernal yelling I'll scatter your brains to the four winds."

It is doubtful if Whisky John had a sufficient quantity of brains to feed four winds, but the threat had an effect. He ceased to yell, and began to whimper.

"Oh! oh! oh! Let me go! I'm the friend of the Bostons forever and ever. I'm your brother. Don't hurt me!"

And he fervently embraced Bloodrod's knees, but the latter gave him a poke which larded him in the bow of the boat, and then enlivened his ribs a trifle with an oar.

"Whisky John," he said sternly, "you know me and I know you, and unless you come to time and talk like a Christian, I shall put a bullet through your body and then feed you to the fish. Will you talk, or shall I heave you over? Which shall it be?"

CHAPTER XXVI.

OLD FOES MEET.

WHISKY JOHN threw up his hands with a wild howl.

"I'll talk!" he cried. "I'll tell all I know, and more. Don't throw me in the water; it'd make me sick. For the love of the white man's Manitou, give me some whisky!"

"What you need most is a flogging," was the sharp reply. "See to it that you don't get it. Now then, here goes for the queen's English. Why did you attack me?"

"Oh! oh! I thought you were my son, that terrible Hotspur Hugh!"

"John, don't lie! Why did you attack me?"

"Oh! oh! We were all drunk, and the whisky went to our heads, and we didn't know what we were doing!"

"Liar!" said Bloodrod, in a terrible voice, "my patience is about run out. For the last time, why did you attack me?"

"Oh! oh! oh!" howled Whisky John mournfully, and then he rolled over in the bottom of the boat and uttered the most lugubrious sounds ever heard from a human throat.

Bloodrod promptly seized him, shoved him half-way out of the boat, and then proceeded to give him a most scientific ducking. It nearly broke old John's heart. He howled and spluttered loudly, and when the spy hauled him in, lay gasping like a fish. Bloodrod, however, was not so easily deceived. He knew he had not injured the fellow, but that he hoped to get off easily by shamming.

"Now then," he continued, "I think it is about time for you to talk. I'm going to have it out of you if I work a week and reduce you to fragments. Old man, who set you on me?"

The Chinook groaned, and it was the groan of defeat.

"I'll tell," he said mournfully.

"Do so. Who was it?"

"Jake Mulligan."

"So! Well, why does he want me dead?"

"I don't know as he does. We was only to duck you."

"John, you belie the traditions of your name. Your tongue is forked—it's infernally forked. Come, stick to the truth. Why does Mulligan want me dead?"

Another dismal groan.

"I don't know. I swear so!"

The Chinook put his hand over where his heart was supposed to be, but while he was wrestling with the fiction of his honor, Bloodrod thought deeply and then abruptly straightened.

"What matters it?" he said aloud. "I know all that you are likely to be able to tell me. Whisky-soaked bummers like you may do the work laid out by arch-villains, but are not likely to be trusted with important secrets. Can you swim, Chinook?"

"Hoolah, yes!"

"Do you see the northern bank?"

"Yes."

"Well—swim!"

The old villain had arisen to his knees, and at the last word Bloodrod unceremoniously shoved him overboard. There was a splash, and the spy looked for further groaning, but old John had bathed in the Columbia for fifty years. He flung out his hands, and then shot away like a fish.

The painter of the second boat was dragging, so the spy easily secured it to his own. Then he rowed on toward the Mission, and in a short time had both boats fastened at their usual places. After that he went into the house, moving as coolly as though his life had not been in danger that night.

At the same time two persons were standing together in the edge of the forest north of the clearing—Isabel and Neal Girdley. He had come upon her unexpectedly as she stood under a tree, but after a little hesitation he went forward and paused by her side.

"You walk late," he said.

"I go for a walk every evening," she slowly replied.

"At this hour so do the panthers and bears."

"I do not fear them."

"And the Indians?"

"They are my friends."

"And the Hudson Bay men?"

"So far, they have done me no harm."

A cold smile curled Girdley's lips.

"Do you think I cannot read you? When I was here before you distinctly told me it was not safe to walk in the forest after dark. Then why are you here now? I will tell you. It is because I am at the Mission. You took all this trouble, and run all this danger, to avoid me!"

Isabel's face flushed.

"If you are so sure of it, you should respect my wishes."

"I did not seek you; I came upon you by chance, and will not trouble you long. But Isabel, what a fall is this! I inspire loathing and fear where once— Well, let the dead past bury its dead."

Girdley leaned on his rifle and looked off into the forest with a manner more softened than usual. Half-unconsciously, he repeated:

"Let the dead past bury its dead."

Isabel felt herself trembling pitifully. Once this man had power to move her heart as no other being ever did, and to-night the old feeling stole over her. And yet, they were so wide—so very wide apart!

"I trust you will not think too hardly of me," she said.

"I will not."

The cold cynicism of the terse expression was worse than a long speech, but it seemed to arouse her.

"The time may come, Neal, when you will not regard me as you do now. I might easily resent what you say, and quarrel with you, but I want you to remember all this when— Well, in the future."

"Remember! I shall remember while I live. How can I forget? The past is branded on my brain as with a red-hot iron. It does not add to my calmness to see yours. You move and have your being as serenely as though there were no one in the world except fever-smitten Chinooks, A B C Chinooks, and religion-craving Chinooks. You are a light to those dark minds—a fountain of knowledge to their parched intellects, a feast to their hungry souls. Verily, I wonder you do not go to Africa to teach the Hottentots the baker's dozen of creeds the world is blessed with."

"I suppose I have the right, if I choose."

"Unquestionably; and I, for one, shall not try to prevent you from going."

"You are very kind."

"Isabel, this war is useless."

"So I think."

"You as much as say that I began it. Well, perhaps I did; I hardly know. Let us drop the subject and return to the house before I make a bigger brute of myself. Come!"

He turned away and Isabel followed, looking at him gravely and doubtfully.

"I wish you could learn to regard me less bitterly," she said, after a pause.

"I wish to Heaven I could!" he replied, vehemently; then, more calmly! "Why do we beat against the bars? We are in the cage and we may as well submit. Here we are at the Mission."

They entered. Mr. Just and the two female teachers were visible; also Bloodrod, sitting at one side and calmly smoking; also Obed Leech-

comb, who was back from a journey supposed to be to another mission, and who was full of zeal, falsehood and hypocrisy.

Isabel glanced from Leechcomb to Girdley in agitation. Her part in keeping them apart will be remembered, and she had hoped they would not meet, but luck had gone against her at the last. She knew Girdley bitterly hated her one-time guardian; she knew Leechcomb had sworn falsely when Girdley was on trial for his life; and she knew the younger man's hot temper well enough to fear the consequences of this meeting.

When they were introduced, both were surprised. The agent had heard the wounded man casually mentioned, but he had misunderstood his name and never suspected his identity. On the other hand, Girdley did not suspect his old foe was in Oregon.

Both bowed coldly at the introduction, and then Neal walked silently to a seat. He wanted time to think. Another of the actors in that old Montreal affair had strangely appeared. What did it mean? He looked sternly at Isabel. Was she an ally of Leechcomb still? Had she intentionally been keeping his presence a secret?

The girl met his gaze and made a quick motion. Neal understood it; truthfully or not, she denied any connection with her former guardian.

Leechcomb and Just did all the talking during the next half-hour. Girdley and Isabel were plainly ill at ease. Bloodrod had nothing to make him nervous, but, as he was always cool, he was cool now. He smoked slowly, regularly, tirelessly, and, smoking, watched and read more than the others suspected.

But the agent was no longer the plausible, oily man Mr. Just had learned to admire. He was ill at ease, and he looked at the others as though he suspected a plot of some sort. He frowned at Isabel and frowned at Girdley. Why were they together after all this lapse of time? There seemed to be but one answer; their quarrel was ended and their former relation resumed.

This idea maddened him, and he lost his head for the first time in many years. Should these people whom he hated, be happy? Never!

He looked at Girdley with an evil smile.

"I have seen our young friend before, but he does not seem to recognize me," he said.

The hunter paid no attention whatever.

"Mr. Girdley!" said the agent, in a louder key.

The hunter remained like a statue. Leechcomb turned to Just. The smile was still on his face, but he looked chagrined and bitter.

"Is our young friend's history known to you, sir?"

"Well, no; not to any great extent," replied the honest superintendent, sublimely unconscious that a cloud was hovering over the party.

He had yet to learn Leechcomb's nature.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE IMPALED SNAKE.

THE mine was ready to explode, and the work went on.

"Our young friend is lucky to be here," said Leechcomb, as blandly as ever. "His chances for living to be an octogenarian seemed small when he was on trial for his life in Montreal—on trial for murder!"

The last words were uttered with a little serpentine hiss, and Bloodrod, looking at Girdley, saw the veins on his forehead swell to unnatural size. It was a severe trial of his self-possession.

"Eh? Bless me! What?" stammered Mr. Just.

"On trial for murder," Obed repeated.

"Who?"

"Girdley."

The hunter had needed no more to arouse the aggressive part of his own nature, and as Mr. Just looked at him with bewilderment he broke in:

"Yes, and that's not all. Here is Girdley, the man honorably acquitted on trial, and here is Obed Leechcomb, the witness whose perjury did not suffice to condemn an innocent man."

The agent smiled blandly.

"The wounded vulture flutters. Mr. Girdley is fortunate that the law gives the accused the benefit of every doubt."

"The only doubt in the case," hotly observed Girdley, "was when you were on the stand. It was then a question whether you lied because it was fun, or because you wanted to shield the real criminal by hanging an innocent man."

Mr. Just sat aghast. He would as soon have expected to see his little clearing turn into an active volcano as to see this outburst. Whom he blamed he did not know; his mind was in such a chaotic state that he could not think of analysis then.

Isabel sat pale and trembling. This scene cut to her heart, and, while she looked imploringly at Neal Girdley, she also seemed alarmed for his sake.

The minor teachers of the Mission, with whom we have nothing to do, were shocked at such a breach of decorum, and, being middle-

aged women, all their sympathy was with Mr. Leechcomb. They looked at young Girdley as though his youth was proof positive that he was a rascal.

Bloodrod alone was perfectly cool. He watched the other parties, but his face was calm and he smoked on tranquilly.

Leechcomb smiled in his disagreeable way at the last remark of Girdley.

"Do not try to turn attention from the point under discussion. I am not on trial. I never was. It was you, Neal Girdley, who was tried. The crime was murder."

"Allow me to inquire, Mr. Leechcomb, why you refer to the matter now?" steadily asked the hunter.

"I wish Mr. Just to know just who he is harboring."

"Do you forget that I was acquitted?"

"For lack of evidence," insinuatingly added Obed.

"What better reason could there be?"

Leechcomb laughed dryly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"There are those in Montreal who still believe you were guilty of Ernest Delorme's death."

Girdley turned to the superintendent.

"Mr. Just," he said, "I am unlucky in having once been accused of a crime, but when I was on trial I was as fully acquitted as man could be. I now walk the earth as freely as any human being, all of which I can prove. Obed Leechcomb was one of the witnesses at my trial, and his testimony went stronger against me than anything else. What he said was a lie made from whole cloth. Despite this lie, I was honorably acquitted. Now, I charge him with opening the case maliciously, and with an intention of prejudicing me in your eyes. Were you a man of my own age, Obed Leechcomb, I would deal with you vigorously. As it is, I can only leave you to the contempt you richly merit."

The agent had tried in vain to interrupt this accusation, but Girdley had set out to speak and he was not to be interrupted, despite Leechcomb's desire to speak. All could see, however, that he was ready to hurl forth another bombshell when his time came.

Bloodrod lounged out from his corner, walked to the rear of Leechcomb's chair, leaned carelessly over it and whispered a few words. What they were no one save the agent heard, but it was enough to turn the whole tide of events.

Leechcomb's face grew pale and set, and he stared straight ahead with the manner of a person who looks yet sees not. Bloodrod, on the contrary, knocked the ashes from his pipe and proceeded to refill it as nonchalantly as though all was peace on earth and good will to men.

Dead silence followed Neal's last remark; a silence during which all expected Obed to speak, but it grew oppressive as no one broke it. Was it the calm which precedes a storm?

It was Bloodrod who spoke first.

"The night is cool, and will be excellent for sleeping," he said, so slowly that the words were almost a drawl.

Nearly every one drew a deep breath. There was something so ridiculous about the observation, coming as it did at such a critical moment, that they would have smiled had the power seemed to be left them. As it was, more than one there was grateful for the interruption.

Bloodrod finished filling his pipe, lit it, and, again leaning over Leechcomb, smoked steadily.

There was an apparent disinclination on the part of both Girdley and Leechcomb to renew the previous subject. Bloodrod, the only person capable of talking coherently just then, said nothing, and the silence continued until one of the female teachers made a remark about Wawtopchelet's fever, Wawtopchelet being an aged Chinook.

All the Mission people fell in as eagerly as though it was the height of their ambition to discuss fevers, but Obed Leechcomb arose and walked out of the house.

Bloodrod, still smoking, followed.

The agent walked across the clearing, and the spy kept by his side. Once or twice the leading man glanced at his pursuer, but it was not until he reached the shadow of the trees that he turned his face, which was white with anger, fully toward the other.

"Mr. Bloodrod," he then said, "I wish to walk alone."

"A good idea. I will walk with you."

"I said I would walk alone."

"I said it was a good idea."

The two men looked steadily and silently at each other. Bloodrod was as calm as the broad Columbia itself, and he had never appeared to enjoy smoking more. The agent, on the contrary, was trembling with anger. He longed to spring upon the spy and throttle him, but he had an unpleasant belief that, to use an expression more forcible than elegant, he "could not throttle one-half of him."

"Do you mean you will force your company upon me?" he huskily asked.

"Now you're getting down to solid horse sense, sir. My conduct may be peculiar, but there's method in it. It means, Mr. Leechcomb, that you are a marked man. You carry an oily

tongue and a venomous heart into yonder Mission. I have tumbled to your game, and, as you forced me to speak plainly to-night, I will say the screws are on."

"Do you mean that I am a prisoner?"

"Nominally, not. You are free to go and come within reasonable limits, but I go and come with you. You may walk up the river if you wish, but if you go, I go. I am your shadow."

Leechcomb looked at the fiery eye which gleamed in the darkness as his enemy calmly smoked. He had never liked the spy, but it had never occurred to him that they would thus come to arms. He had expected every day that Bloodrod would disappear forever from view—stamped out by Jake Mulligan's heavy foot.

The agent was writhing like an impaled serpent. He had sold himself to the whisky-trader, and he suspected there was a plot afoot to sweep the "Boston" out of the Columbia country, but he did not wish to be actively mixed up with it.

On the contrary, if there was a massacre, he wished to stand forth at the end as a bright meteor from a desolate sky; a hero of the good, old-fashioned kind.

But now this demon of the pipe was threatening him with ruin.

"Do you know what you are doing?" he asked, in a sibilant voice, still like the impaled snake.

"Watching you."

"Do you intend to keep it up?"

"Yes."

"Curse you!"

Considering that Obed was an agent of good and great people, his exclamation seemed a little more emphatic than was permissible. Still, it expressed but a small part of what was in his heart. Murder was there. It occurred to him that he would never be at ease while this man, who had whispered to him of his treacherous bargain with Jake Mulligan, was alive. He resolved, hastily and recklessly, to put him out of the way.

He drew from his coat a knife; he surveyed the spy keenly; he marked the place where lay his heart; he struck out with all his force. His hand fell, but the wrist dropped into Bloodrod's hand, and then the knife was wrested away.

"I wouldn't if I were you," said the spy, laughing. "I am not to be carved up like a steak. Bear this in mind, Leechcomb, and be wise while you may. Shall we go in?"

Without a word the agent turned, and they walked toward the house together. The elder man was silent. He was angry and venomous, but his wrath was vain. Bloodrod followed, serenely smoking, and the darkness swallowed up the impaled snake and the demon of the pipe.

But the storm of wrath was checked, not averted.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS.

NIGHT!

Jake Mulligan's cabin was silent, but a light shone broadly from the window. Inside, three persons were visible. The brawny whisky-trader sat by the fire, smoking and gazing at the blazing brands. Whether he imagined pictures there, as all who have delighted in an open fire-place are apt to do, or not, is uncertain. If he did, the pictures must have been of carnage, crime and red tragedy; of desolate heartbs, blazing roofs, and of human lives cut short before their Creator's will.

Within reach of his arm Brimstone Jake sat and dozed, arousing, now and then, to tersely observe that he was a roarer; a mild phantasy of his brain which did no harm.

Further apart, Lona sat in one corner and sewed on a coarse garment evidently for her father's ungrateful back. Even that person had never accused her of lack of industry, but on this occasion she worked but fitfully; her stitching was interrupted by long pauses during which she gazed fixedly at vacancy.

Perhaps, however, she saw as much there as the whisky-trader saw in the fire.

The latter finally raised his head and looked at his daughter, a scowl on his face.

"Whar be your wits wool-gathering now?" he roughly asked.

Lona started.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that ye're ez narvous ez a witch. Whet the blazes ails ye? Durn it, I never did see such a critter ez a woman is. Quit starin' at ther blank wall, will ye? Want ter call up a ghost! Don't ye do it; quit yer starin'. Ye remind me, o' late, o' yer mother. She was ther most solemncholly critter I ever see'd: a walkin' monument o' grief. All she needed was an epigram, or whatever ye call it, sayin' 'Hyar lies ther undersigned; peace ter her ashes'—all she needed, I say, was this, an' she'd been a reg'lar graveyard. You're like her!"

Mulligan looked at his daughter as though he was personally wounded and outraged by such inconsiderate women. Why should they be melancholy while he was near?

"I didn't know I was offending," said Lona. The whisky-trader sniffed suspiciously.

"Tbis weakness don't mean no good. You never had it until you visited that durned Mission. Stop it! Sing back something sassy at me, ez you used ter do. Tell me ter mind my own business an' let yourn alone. Be nat'ral; be venomous; be anything, only, for ther Lord's sake, don't be a weepin' willer!"

"Do you expect anything but weeping willows and grave-stones around you?" deeply asked the girl.

"By ther fiends, I dunno; mebbe I've got ter hev 'em, but if I hev, I'll hev 'em in ther spirit, not in ther flesh. You b'ar that in mind an' stop mopin'."

Mulligan's manner was as ugly as his words, but further conversation was interrupted by the arrival of a guest. He was not the only one who came. One after another, with intervals of one to five minutes between them, came four men, all of whom were clearly expected.

Came Basil St. Cyr. Welcome. Came Brick Rose. Welcome. Came Naika, the Molack. Welcome. Came Whisky John, the Chinook. Said to be welcome.

These men greeted each other as they arrived with the friendliness of fellow conspirators. St. Cyr and Rose looked admiringly at Lona: Naika was grave and silent as a King Philip; Whisky John looked unhappy until their host brought out a black bottle.

The five men sat down at the table. Lona looked imploringly at her father, but he shook his head and frowned. She had mutely asked permission to retire and had been refused. She must remain to be their servant.

"Gents," said Mulligan, "thar ain't much need o' ceremony hyar. We hev met fur business, an' we'll preceed ter it at onct. This hyar is ther funeral o' ther Bostons. They ain't wanted in Oregon. They've got ter git up an' dust."

"My brother speaks straight," said Naika.

"What is Oregon?" questioned Mulligan, warming under the sun of his own oratory. "It's a broad track o' land layin' up hyar. It's ther home o' ther Indian, the beaver, mink an' fox, an' of a few decent settlers like—like us. Ther trappin' industry is large, an' ther Indians an' ther Hudson Bay men hev attended ter it all right. But ther Bostons had ter come an' stick their long noses inter ther dough-dish, an' they spilt ther hull thing. They cheated ther Indians; they cut in on ther Hudson Bay men; they was ez mean ez a Boston kin be; an' they persecuted honest men who was makin' an honest livin'."

Here the whisky-trader warmed anew to his subject, and the table danced under a blow of his heavy hand.

"I'm an honest man," he said, "an' I make an' honest livin'. I supply ther Indians with a necessary of life."

"Ugb! Good, much good!" broke in Whisky John, as he sampled the "necessary" of life again.

"I do an honest business, an' meddle with no man," said Mulligan. "We all like whisky. We hev ter hev it. It's good fur man; it's good fur woman; it's good fur ther baby. I tell you, half ther babies would die young ef it wa'n't fur whisky. But ther durned Bostons want ter sbet up my manufactory, ter kill my business, ter eddicate ther reds—ther Indians, I mean—an' they say I an' ther Hudson Bay Company must go. What do we say?"

"I am Naika, the chief of the Molacks," said that person. "I am an Indian. I live on land bequeathed to the Indians by their forefathers. I claim the right to remain there; to hunt and trap; to sell my peltries to whomever I choose. I do not choose to trade with the Boston, nor to be his friend. He is of an evil race. He lies to the Indian and cheats him. He is the Indian's foe, and he must die!"

"Good!" added St. Cyr. "I represent the Hudson Bay Company, who are the friends of the Indian. We are very angry that the Bostons should cheat our red brothers, and we will help to sweep them away."

"Up by the Giant's Arm," put in Brick Rose, "I have a score of men who don't know what fear is. They are ready to fight the Bostons until the men with the crooked tongues are driven away from the Columbia."

"My name is Eagle-that-kills," said Whisky John, smiting his breast. "I am a Chinook and a great warrior. Some day I will be a chief and have many scalps at my belt. I, too, hate the Bostons. Let us sweep them away, and then we will drink more whisky than we drink now."

"Let us swear!" said Mulligan, as he drove his knife into the table; and four other blades were buried beside his.

Lona shuddered. To her the matter was terrible in the extreme, for she knew the hybrid gang meant all they said, and that blood was doomed to dye the Columbia soil unless their plans were thwarted.

She felt sick at heart, yet she could not turn her gaze from the men at the table.

"One place we wanter look arter in pertic'lar is ther so-called New England Mission," said Mulligan. "It's a nest o' snakes. I hate 'em all. Old Just is a hypocrite, an' so is all his teachers,

an' he's took in ther wu'st enemy o' our league that thar is in Oregon—I mean Bloodrod, ther spy. He must die!"

"Good! good! good!" said Whisky John, putting his fingers to his throat, where Bloodrod's hands had been just twenty-four hours before.

"I agree with you," said St. Cyr, scowling.

"But how?" questioned Mulligan.

"How?"

"Yes."

"The means are immaterial so long as the end is accomplished satisfactorily."

"Thar's ther rub," said the whisky-trader, nodding rapidly. "Bloodrod is ez hard ter kill ez an eel. Put yer foot on him an' he'll wiggle away. Cuss him! he's got a habit o' callin' me 'Honest man' which I don't approve on."

"He called me anything but an honest man."

"Wal, ther p'nt I wanted ter make is right byar. This Bloodrod is a slippery critter, an' he's ther wu'st foe we've got in Oregon. What I think is that he orter be silenced afore ther general blow is struck; if he ain't, 'twould be jest like him ter upset ther hull business."

"Well, let him be killed," said St. Cyr.

"Who shall do it?"

"You may."

"Partner, I'm no hog," said the whisky-trader, with a grin. "I'm willin' ter give ther rest a chance. I propose we drawr lots an' settle who shell hev ther job."

"That's fair," said Rose.

"Yes," slowly added St. Cyr.

"My brothers are right," coincided Naika.

"Brothers, I had rather not be one of you this time," said Whisky John, trembling. "I am out of practice, and—"

"We all take part," said Mulligan, inexorably. "Gal, fix five slips o' paper; one short an' four long; him who gits ther short un ter do ther killin'."

Lona's face was as white as a living person's could be. She prepare the death-lottery for a man who had been kinder to her than any other man had ever been! She help to choose the assassin of Luke Bloodrod, the grandest man in Oregon, the man she had learned to—

"Come, stir around lively an' git ther papers. Don't be all day. Be you turnin' inter a pillar o' salt?"

"No," she half-unconsciously answered.

"Then, git up an' stir around."

"I will prepare the papers," said St. Cyr, smiling at the whisky-trader's daughter.

"No, ye won't. She's goin' ter do it. I ain't goin' ter hev her set thar like Cleopatra's obeliskum. Gal, do I see ye stirrin', or do ye need some help?"

The coarseness and brutality of his words were not more apparent than the same things in his manner, but every one forgot him as Lona electrified them by replying:

"You do not see me stirring, for I decline to help you in any way in your murderous work!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SHADOW OF A TRAGEDY.

JAKE MULLIGAN stared blankly at his daughter. They had often quarreled in the past, and she had never curbed her tongue in talking to him, but he had really governed her with a heavy hand—a hand he did not hesitate to use when necessary—and this was the first time she had ever flatly rebelled.

He arose and stood looking at her with an expression fit for a contemplated butcher of men. "Gal, did I hear aright?" he muttered hoarsely.

"I presume you did. I refuse to help you."

"You refuse to obey when I speak?"

"I refuse to help you in this infamous work," she replied as steadily as though she was daring no danger, but her face was pale and full of misery.

Mulligan snatched up his knife, which had been left sticking in the table.

"You'll obey, or git this!" he said hoarsely.

But St. Cyr quickly arose and caught his arm.

"Wait, mon ami. This is not wise. What do we care if the young lady does refuse? We can easily do the work ourselves, and it is certainly not just what she would like."

And he bowed gallantly to Lona.

Mulligan was not pleased with the interruption, for he wished to have his own way, to make his daughter feel the weight of his anger and learn to obey; but St. Cyr, as a representative of the British fur company, was a man he dared not offend.

He gave way sullenly, looking darkly at Lona, and St. Cyr, failing to find the necessary paper, prepared five sticks and presented them for the drawing of lots.

Brick Rose was the first man, and he drew without perceptible emotion. He had a long stick; he was exempt.

Mulligan sat next, and though he hesitated a little, he had the same luck as Rose.

Whisky John was a badly frightened man when his hand hovered over the fatal sticks, and he again tried to withdraw from the lottery. In vain. He drew with a hand shaking with fear and whisky. He held a long stick.

"Naika," said the Frenchman, "it rests between us."

The Molack made a sweeping gesture.

"It shall soon be decided," he said.

He drew, and then he held up a stick two inches shorter than the others, but his impassive face remained as usual.

"The Boston spy dies!" he calmly said.

"That's settled," said Mulligan, more cheerfully, "an' now ez ter ther other work. We must all strike together, and make a sure thing on't. Ther Bostons must all go but one; that one I claim."

St. Cyr looked quickly at the speaker.

"Who is that one?" he quietly asked.

"Ther young teacher o' ther Mission; Isabel Gray, by name. She's ez clean a stepper ez ever put buff ter sile, an' I reckon she an' me would work wal in double harness. I've see'd an' admired her. I reserve her fur myself."

The Frenchman carelessly puffed out a wreath of smoke.

"I dare say Naika will not object," he said.

"My brother's wish is law," said the Molack, nodding to the whisky-trader.

St. Cyr made no comment, but, inwardly, he said,

"I'll be cursed if it's mine. I want Isabel Dalton Gray, and no one shall step between her and me."

Unconscious of the drift of his ally's thoughts, Mulligan settled back in the best of humor. The remaining details of the prospective massacre were soon arranged, St. Cyr's trappers, Rose and the Banded Brothers, Naika's Indians, and such of the Chinooks as could be brought out—all were said to be ready, and it was arranged that the blow should be struck on the following night.

Lona listened to all this bloodthirsty plot with dismay and horror. Nothing that the whisky-trader might do in the line of villainy surprised her, but she had a deeper interest in this matter than ever before. We have already seen that, despite her early training, the good in her nature was ever struggling for the mastery. That better part of her nature had been deeply touched by Isabel's kindness. For the first time in her life she had heard a woman speak to her with real kindness. Had she been differently placed she would have responded at once, but the fact that she was there as Jake Mulligan's spy kept her silent and caused her sullen perverse words.

But she remembered the teacher with tenderness, and the thought of the red-handed allies at the Mission filled her with horror.

Nor was this all. She had this night seen a lottery of death; she had seen Naika, the Molack, selected as the man to assassinate Luke Bloodrod. Bloodrod! The thought of him awoke a feeling within her which was new and strange. When he had talked with her at the Mission, she had been obliged to use all decision to avoid confessing the truth. His voice swayed her as the wind sways the rose. He had come like a new light to her darkened life, and she had acknowledged his power and her submission by tacitly making him king of her heart.

And now he was doomed to die!

"To die? It shall not be!" she thought, fiercely. "I will save him though my treachery to Jake Mulligan costs me my life. Well, so let it be. I'm not sure but I'd rather die if I could die at his feet."

She aroused a little as the guests prepared to go; Brick Rose, bluff and careless; Naika, stern and dignified; Whisky John weak on his legs from the stuff he had drank; and St. Cyr, polite and bland, pausing to bid a courtly farewell to Mulligan's girl.

They were gone at last.

Then the whisky-trader turned to his daughter.

"What're ye moanin' about?" he demanded.

"I'm not moaning."

"I say ye be. You grow more an' more like a weepin' willer. You're a pretty specimen ter hev around, ain't ye? Who've you buried? When's ther funeral? Whar's ther hearse?"

Mulligan poked the fire viciously, and though there was a grim satisfaction in his manner, there was also a good deal of menace. He was ready to explode with anger and Lona knew it. Knowing him as she did, she decided that her best course was not to reply to the last remark.

"Sulky, eh?" resumed Mulligan, with his worst manner. "Now, then, I'd like ter know what ails you. Did yer brief stay at that durned Mission do all ther harm? Now I think on't, I remember when that Bloodrod came byar you was in a mighty takin' ter keep out o' his sight. I've got an idee. So you're in love with him, be you?"

The coarse taunt aroused all Lona's old combative ness, and she recovered a good deal and retorted:

"That's my affair!"

"I reckon it's mine, too, an' right glad I be that I tumbled to it ez soou ez I did. I'll fix ye!"

The speaker devoted the next five minutes to meditation, and then, as Lona started to leave the room, he arose and barred her way.

"No, ye don't!" he said, placing his hand

roughly on her arm. "You ain't goin' ter ther precious Mission ter betray us. Not much! Brimstone Jake, awake!"

The man addressed came out of his chair and a supposed slumber at the same time.

"I'm a Roarer!" he observed.

"Ther time fur you ter roar hez come," said Mulligan, sternly. "Matters has got ter a pinch, an' you may ez wal be knowed as more than a sleeper. You've played yer part wal an' deceived many, but ther mask must come off now. Tie this gal's hands!"

The whisky-trader was holding his daughter, despite her efforts to escape, and Brimstone Jake deftly applied cords to her hands, securing them behind her back. She pleaded for liberty, thinking always of Bloodrod, but these men were as inexorable as though their hearts were veritable stones.

Brimstone Jake had, indeed, undergone a metamorphosis. His sleepy look had vanished. He stood erect and his eyes were keen. He, however, looked to Mulligan for all his directions.

The two half-led, half-carried their prisoner to the upper part of the building; an unfurnished, low room which she had always used as a chamber; and the loose end of the cord which bound her hands was tied to a stout timber.

"Hyar you'll stay fur ther present," said Mulligan, remorselessly. "Ef you wa'n't my darter I'd fix ye so ye wouldn't tell no tales out o' school, but it's a fact that you've done pretty fair by me. I'll remember it now. You sha'n't be hurt, but byar you stay till—wal, you know what's in yer mind."

Yes, she knew; and when Mulligan had descended to the lower part of the house she laid her head on a chair and broke into passionate sobbing.

Her heart was full. She thought of the gathering allies and the shadow of the tragedy which hung over the Mission, and, with a still more bitter pang, she thought of Naika and his mission; of the work allotted him by the drawing of the short stick in the fatal lottery.

What would happen to Bloodrod? There seemed but one answer. Woman's fears always look at one side only. Lona did not think of the possibility that the spy might worst Naika, but she accepted it as a fact that the Molack would accomplish his dread purpose.

"Oh, merciful Heaven, protect him—protect him!"

It was the cry she mutely sent up all through the night—a night long to be remembered. She slept but little. When she did lose consciousness, troubled dreams destroyed her rest. In imagination she saw Bloodrod in every species of peril. Dark, murderous Naika pursued him here, there, everywhere, creeping panther-like on his prey, and the glimmer of his knife flashed again and again in Bloodrod's path, unseen by him.

A troubled day followed a troubled night. There was no change for the better. That night the allies were to attack the Mission. Each passing moment brought the fatal hour later. Lona was in despair. She wrestled with her bonds until her wrists were raw and bleeding. It was in vain, and the hours rolled on.

Night approached; a night which seemed pregnant with untold terrors. The shadow of the coming tragedy was on her life like the touch of the destroying cyclone.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MOLACK SEEKS BLOODROD.

On the morning preceding the meeting of the conspirators at Mulligan's, the inmates of the Mission arose in a mood greatly in contrast to their usual peaceful one.

Mr. Just looked unusually aged and careworn. He had tried in vain to learn the nature of the trouble between Leechcomb and Girdley. Neither was inclined to talk freely, and Isabel did not betray the fact that she could throw light on the subject.

Both Miss Gray and Girdley maintained an outward composure and were amiable to Bloodrod, feeling that his prompt efforts had been valuable beyond expression.

The spy was the ruling spirit of the place. He had never been more at ease. He was superlatively calm and easy, now and then stopping to jest with his associates. One thing nearly broke Old Leechcomb's heart, however.

Over him Bloodrod had watched all night. Leechcomb had slept but little; Bloodrod assumed to sleep a good deal. When Leechcomb left his bed, however, Bloodrod invariably left his immediately. The elder man was under espionage, and he might as well have tried to throw off a sleuth-hound.

Morning brought no change for the better. Wherever Leechcomb went, the spy followed. If the leader fancied he had thrown off his follower, he had only to look over his shoulder and see him following.

If looks could kill, as the old saying is, the agent would have slain his pursuer then and there. He did not slay him, however.

Late in the forenoon he stopped in the yard where some of the Chinook children were playing, and stood looking at them with a sly, vicious

look on his once bland face. Bloodrod sauntered forward, and drawing a handful of pennies from his pocket, soon had the young Indians pitching them at a mark.

Leechcomb glared at him furiously. Such levity in the midst of his baffled rascality was terrible. The old man groaned, went inside the house, and sat down in a corner. He kept the place, solitary and lone, for a long time. Mr. Just looked at him timidly now and then, but the meek superintendent had been figuratively carried off his feet by the rush of events.

The spy improved the lull to speak to Girdley.

"My friend, you will perceive that I've helped you out of a fix," he observed, calmly.

"I do perceive it, and I thank you sincerely," replied Girdley, earnestly.

"Have I done right?"

"Right?"

"Yes."

"What do you mean?"

"You and Leechcomb were at sword's-points when I chipped in on general principles and helped you out. Did I know you were right? No. The nature of your trouble was unknown to me, and Leechcomb made the charge a serious one. I acted on what I may define as impulse; a very reckless thing to do. Now, then, what proof have I that I did right?"

"My word of honor, for one thing," began Girdley, hesitatingly, but the spy interrupted him.

"I take you to be an honest man, Mr. Girdley, but you must acknowledge that it would be a reckless man who would rest satisfied with the proof you offer, coming from a stranger. Pardon my plain speech; I believe you are too sensible to be offended. Now, there is a way for you to prove that you are all right."

"How?"

"Why are you at the Mission?"

The hunter started.

"Why am I here?" he slowly repeated.

"Yes."

"Because I am a wanderer over the West, and must be somewhere."

"A fair-sounding explanation, but would it satisfy Brick Rose and the Banded Brothers?"

Girdley recoiled, his face the image of dismay.

"Let us not forget your friends of the valley," the spy calmly added.

"What do you know of them?"

"More about them than I do about the motive which led you to serve them; to come here as their agent. To me, this affair has a bad look, but, perhaps, you can explain it satisfactorily."

Girdley's face did not resume its usual expression, and it was clear that he was still dismayed. He looked here, there, everywhere that he could, as though hoping to see a way from his dilemma, but the stubborn facts of the case were not to be avoided. Some decision must be made, however, and he faced the fact manfully.

"Bloodrod, I believe you are a just man," he said.

"I never recommend my private character, but in matters of public good, I am."

"Then I will tell you why I am here. You know when I was wounded I was taken here by Hotspur Hugh, the young Indian. Had I been a sensible man I should have remained, but I had a prejudice against a certain inmate who need not be named here, and when the fever went to my head I performed the remarkable feat of crawling out of the window and taking an unceremonious leave. Then I wandered on in the forest and became as crazy as a loon, as the saying goes. While in this condition the Banded Brothers found me and took me to their home. I was helpless as a babe, but they nursed me with the care of a brother and I pulled through, avoiding a weakening run of fever."

"When my senses came back my chief feeling was gratitude to these men. I felt for the first time what it was to be a wanderer, uncared for and friendless. I felt weak and miserable. And when I remembered how these men had snatched me from the jaws of death; how they had cared for me night and day; my heart warmed to them. Then it was that Brick Rose asked me to join them, and, saying that they had been ill-used by the people of this Mission, asked me to come here as their spy. That's about all, unless I add that, many times since I came, I have had grave doubts in regard to my course, and—well, what questions have you to ask?"

"Do you know the business of Brick Rose and his men?"

"Rose said they were free-trappers, but—"

"But what?"

"I am not sure he told the truth."

"There is room for doubt," said Bloodrod, dryly. "Brick Rose has not set a trap for many years; I doubt if he ever handled one unless it was to rob some trapper of his gains. No, Rose and his men have but one business, and this is it: They make the whisky which Jake Mulligan strews broadcast over Oregon, and, really, are employees of that honest man!"

"Great Heavens! and I am their accomplice!" bitterly exclaimed the hunter.

"So it seems."

"But I will not remain so. I will go to Brick Rose and tell him that, as our union has not fairly begun, I cancel my engagement, and will have nothing to do with them."

"Softly, softly," said the unmoved spy. "Should you do that he will put some other watcher upon us. Let him think you are faithful for awhile, and we will try to pull through the danger which plainly menaces the Mission."

An understanding having thus been brought about, both men talked more freely and a better feeling was established. Girdley agreed to ostensibly retain his position as Rose's agent, as he might thereby learn something of the valley chief's plans and help to thwart them. Gaining some idea of the peril which menaced the Mission, he became as earnest as Bloodrod in his desire to avert that danger.

Bloodrod then went to Mr. Just and informed him that he could prove by Hotspur Hugh, as well as by corroborative evidence, that Leechcomb had made a bargain with Jake Mulligan, by which the latter should ply his trade unmolested along the Columbia and its tributaries, and that he—the agent—would help him all he could; and then he asked permission to seize the man and confine him in the Mission preparatory to expelling him from the territory.

As might have been expected, Mr. Just was not equal to the demands of the occasion. He did not attempt to defend Leechcomb, but he lacked the boldness necessary to take the step Bloodrod proposed.

Having no choice in the matter the spy then fell back on another plan, and he and Girdley proceeded to divide the watch on Leechcomb. Wherever that man went, one of them followed. He rebelled, he stormed, he threatened; but, calmly and relentlessly, they kept the watch.

The day passed, and so did the following night. Then another day dawned; the day when Lona Mulligan crouched in the attic and watched the fleeting hours with a heart full of misery; the day before the night when the allies proposed to strike their blow and sweep the "Bostons" out of Oregon and out of existence.

At twilight Bloodrod was in the forest beyond the Mission. The shadow of coming events was strong on this evening, and, despite his outward calmness, he was really ill at ease.

Every hour he expected the threatened blow to fall, while, on the other hand, any hour might bring Hotspur Hugh and the reinforcements from Astoria. He had tried in vain to make Mr. Just abandon the Mission and secrete himself and his party until help came.

Just, however, firmly refused. He was in Oregon on an errand of peace and good-will to men. He had used all men justly, and he relied on this fact to protect him. He declined to leave, and so did all the teachers.

Consequently, Bloodrod was placed in a passive position. He and his companions could do nothing except to wait. If Hotspur and his party came first, the Mission was saved; if the allies came first, they would work their will, whatever that was.

So the spy, walking in the wood by the river's bank, looked westward as far as he could see, and listened long and often. He would have given much to hear the sound of oars, but the river was as calm as though its bosom had never been pressed by a craft of any kind. Something else impressed him as being less peaceful. A rustling of the leaves near at hand! A simple sound in any wood, yet Bloodrod did not now explain it by any natural deduction.

He looked toward the suspicious quarter. There he saw a darker spot among the dark bushes. It might be a bear, but the spy did not believe it was. It might be a panther, but he doubted it.

He had another theory.

Quietly he loosened his knife, disguising the motion as he had disguised his glance at the dark spot. Then, with his knife held ready for action, he sauntered near the dark spot. To all appearances he was entirely listless, but, whatever was in the bushes, it could not be more alert than he really was.

He reached the dark spot and passed it. The bushes rustled again, this time louder than before. Bloodrod wheeled like a flash. He was just in time. Beside him towered the form of a stalwart Indian, and in his hand he held a weapon like the spy's.

Naika, the Molack, had come to do his work. He had found no mean foe, and, in a moment more, the two men were clasped in an embrace which meant death to one of them.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE WOLVES ENTER THE FOLD.

BLOODROD knew as soon as he had a fair view of his adversary that no Chinook was in his grasp. This tall, strong-limbed son of the forest was very different from Whisky John, and he would make a very different kind of a fight. Still, the spy was an adept at the science of wrestling, and he had no fears for himself.

Naika had been for a moment disconcerted by his failure to stab the "Boston" in the back, but he quickly rallied and settled down to work.

The struggle which followed was terrific. The rapid motions of the men, accompanied by collisions with trees, soon deprived both of the knives, and then they fought on empty-handed, but with terrible resolution.

Three times in rapid succession Bloodrod tripped the Indian, but the latter's hold was never broken and he came up like a snake wriggling out of danger.

Bloodrod, however, was not disposed to make the fight a long one, and he succeeded in drawing his pistol. He had no compunctions about using it. He had not recognized the Molock, but he knew his purpose. The sooner he was out of the world, the better.

He managed to cock the pistol and bring it around where he could use it. He pulled the trigger. The report sounded dullly, and then the grasp of the Molock suddenly relaxed, he staggered back, and lay a limp weight in Bloodrod's arms.

The latter laid him down, lit a match and held it over his face. He recognized him. He looked at the wound. It was mortal, and he thought the man already dead, but his eyes opened and he looked up with a venomous glare.

"Accursed Boston!" he said, "your hand has killed a great warrior. Manitou, thy son is coming. Boston, may the hand which struck me wither at your side!"

"You are lying in a bed of your own making," said the spy, sternly. "Why did you attack me?"

"Aha! you think you have triumphed, but those who come after me shall do the work I have failed to perform. Ha! the night grows darker. Where's the trail? Call the King George chief and—brush—the—smoke—away!"

The voice grew faint, the head fell back, and the smoke was brushed away forever. Naika, the Molock was dead, and the wind and the river sung his dirge.

Bloodrod stood erect and meditated. What ought he to do with the body? The proximity of the Columbia furnished an answer. It would go hard with the settlers if the Molacks knew their chief had died by a white man's hand. To tell the truth and show that Naika had courted his fate would be but to be disbelieved. No; the best way was to consign the remains to the river; so he made a rope of the chief's own garments, weighted the body and dropped it in a deep place by the bank.

This done he washed his hands and retraced his steps to the Mission. All was the same there as when he left. He took Girdley aside and told him what had occurred, keeping the tragedy from every other person.

The young men agreed that they would be lucky to get through the night without trouble. Neither doubted that the allies would soon attack, and if they did such a thing, the quicker it came, the better.

"I wish Hotspur Hugh would come," said Bloodrod, for the twentieth time.

"You cannot reasonably expect him and the trappers before to-morrow afternoon."

"Then, I'm afraid that only ashes will mark where the Mission now stands."

Girdley had begun to answer when the spy suddenly put out his hand.

"Hark!"

"What is it?"

"The sound of a paddle, I think."

"Can it be Hugh and the trappers?"

"No, it is from up the river. Listen!"

It was not to distinguish the sound of the paddle that Bloodrod bent forward. That had become distinct. He discovered, however, that the canoe was coming on very swiftly, and heading for the Mission.

Who was moving in such haste?

A dark object loomed up in the darkness and still approached. Girdley cocked his rifle.

"For your life, don't fire!" said the spy, hurriedly. "Stand back from sight. Who is it, who is it?"

He seemed greatly excited for one of his usually cool blood, and then, as the canoe was driven against the bank, and the voyager sprung out, he started eagerly forward.

"Lona!" he exclaimed.

"Bloodrod! Thank God!"

The girl uttered the words in a husky voice, and then staggered and would have fallen had he not caught her. Her strength seemed almost gone.

"What is it? What is wrong?" the spy demanded.

"The Mission! Flee, flee! They are coming, and they will kill all!" gasped the girl.

"They? Who?"

"St. Cyr—Brick Rose—the Molacks. Oh! Bloodrod, beware of Naika. He has sworn to kill you."

"He'll grow gray before he does it. But, what do you say, Lona; are the allies really coming?"

"Yes, yes; they are on their way. Rose and the Banded Brothers are coming down the river; St. Cyr and the Hudson Bay men up, while the Molacks are coming through the forest. All have banded themselves together and sworn to burn the Mission and kill the people. They will spare no one. Oh! get them away while you can!"

The girl spoke rapidly and feverishly, though her voice often became nearly inaudible. This, together with her trembling as she still rested in Bloodrod's arms, showed the nervous state she was in, but he was sure she spoke only too truly.

"How much time have we?" he coolly asked.

"I do not know, but it can be only a little. I passed Brick Rose and his men as I was coming down."

"To the Mission then."

Still keeping one arm around her waist, the spy strode into the clearing, followed by Girdley. He had not asked Lona what she would do now, but it was his intention to keep her with him and she did not demur.

They entered the main building of the collection like a gust of wind. Mr. Just had been reading some solid book of theoretical value, but it went to the floor with a slam as the newcomers burst in.

"Up, and away!" cried Bloodrod. "Mr. Just, Isabel, all of you—the danger I warned you against is come. The allies are at hand to burn, destroy and kill. Do not wait for anything, but follow me. We must take to the woods. Come!"

Girdley had not waited for the conclusion of this speech. He hastened at once to Miss Gray's side.

"Isabel," he said, eagerly, "let us forget our differences for the time. Our lives are in danger. Put yourself in my care, and I will do all that man can do for you. I swear it!"

What followed was too confused for description. Mr. Just and all the teachers except Isabel were either too frightened to act for themselves, or stubbornly set on remaining as they were; Leechcomb came out of his corner with glittering eyes, as though what he had waited for had come; and Isabel alone of the inmates showed the courage which the occasion imperatively demanded.

Bloodrod and Lona by turns tried to make Just understand the magnitude of his danger. In vain.

"I have done no man harm; I am no man's enemy," he said, with firmness lamentably out of place. "If these for whom I have labored are resolved to kill me, I will die in the Mission I have founded."

"Great heavens! what can we do?" said Bloodrod, almost in despair.

"We can, at least, die fighting," said Girdley.

"Let there be no fighting here," interrupted Just.

"Fighting! There will be murder. Arouse, man, arouse! This delay will be fatal. Bloodrod, what shall we do?"

The spy had taken a moment for thought, and he was again the cool man of fortune.

"There are two persons here who must be saved at all hazards," he said, steadily. "Take you Miss Gray and follow where I lead."

He swung his arm once more around Lona's waist and passed from the cabin, followed by Girdley and Isabel. Leechcomb, who had been standing irresolutely, gnawing his fingers as a dog gnaws at a bone, started to follow, but Girdley laid his hand on his weapons and the agent fell back.

Bloodrod led the way rapidly to the river and handed Isabel and Lona into the larger boat.

"The nearest point of safety is Astoria," he then said, addressing Neal, "and toward there you must go. Do not forget that Lona has said that St. Cyr is coming by that course, and beware of fellow-voyagers as you go. Should you see and recognize Hotspur Hugh and the trappers, however, you are saved. Set the bow of the boat due west and pull for all you are worth. Enter; enter at once!"

With gentle force he pushed Girdley into the boat and swung the oars around for his hands. Despite all he had said, it was not until he stooped that the hunter suspected his purpose.

"But you—but you!" he exclaimed. "Are you not going?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"My place is yonder—at the Mission. Those unhappy people are sadly wanting in judgment, but they must have one reliable arm to defend them. Do not heed me. Neal Girdley, yours is a precious cargo; see that you guard it well!"

He had stooped again to the gunwale, but Lona arose and held out her arms.

"Luka, Luka!" she cried. "I will not go without you. You will be killed. I—Heaven help him!"

He had given the boat a strong shove, which sent it well out on the bosom of the river, and then he sternly added:

"Oars, Neal Girdley, and pull for your lives. Pull!"

All there knew it was useless to rebel further; it was only a waste of time, and that brave man could not be turned from his purpose; and the hunter bent to his work, and the trio glided away from the imperiled Mission.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE PILLAR OF FIRE.

GIRDLEY used the oars mechanically for awhile, for the spy's sacrifice had taken him wholly by surprise, but a sob from Lona

aroused him. Isabel bent over the backwoods girl.

"Be of good cheer," she said, gently.

"I care nothing for myself; I can die!" cried Mulligan's daughter, between her sobs; "but be—Bloodrod—they will murder him. All have sworn it, and Naika drew the fatal paper. Ah! Heaven, why can't I die with him?"

Isabel's arms were around her, but it was Girdley who practically replied:

"Naika has tried his luck already, but he drew a blank. He tried to kill Bloodrod, but lost his own life instead, and fifteen feet of the Columbia water rolls above him. As for the rest, trust Luke to look out for them. He has a courage which is sublime, and I believe his wit will keep step with his nerve."

Despite his cheerful air, the hunter was as much troubled as any one in the boat. He considered the spy guilty of rank suicide. He was the only fighting man left at the Mission, and what could he do against the mass of allies coming on?

Once Girdley paused and was tempted to turn back, but he glanced at Isabel and rowed on. No; her life was too precious to be thrown away; he must go on.

Isabel still held her companion in her arms, and Mulligan's girl was growing calmer. She was, however, far from being at ease. Her great efforts to save the people of the Mission appeared to have succeeded but poorly while Bloodrod remained in peril.

None of them knew the history of her gallant effort in their behalf. They did not know how she had been confined in the attic by the whisky-trader; how she had succeeded, after long effort, in breaking her bonds; how, finding Brimstone Jake occupying the kitchen and wide awake, she had removed a portion of the roof and lowered herself to the ground by a rope made of blankets; of her flight to the river, where she found both boats gone but a canoe rocking at the bank; how, resolving to appropriate it, she was about to shove away when an Indian appeared and challenged her; how she had stricken him down with the paddle and then started for the Mission in hot haste.

This eventful story was unknown to them, and, though she might tell it in future days—if she lived to do so—they would never be able to fully realize just how heroic she had been.

Girdley rowed on at good speed. Having once decided on his course he resolved to put as much space between the Mission and his precious freight as was possible, and he settled down to his work in earnest.

He had crossed to the southern bank, which he proceeded to hug, keeping in the shadow of the trees, and watching as he could for the expected fleet of St. Cyr.

Silence had fallen between the inmates of the boat, but all looked back toward the Mission, expecting something startling to occur. Something startling did occur. It was the report of a rifle, deadened by distance, yet plainly proceeding from the little collection of cabins.

"My God!" said Lona, in horror, "they are there!"

Her words needed no explanation, and no one replied. Girdley, however, ceased to row, and all looked toward the suspected quarter anxiously. The night was intensely dark, and the intervening trees would have shut out the Mission, anyway, but they still watched and listened.

After that single rifle-shot nothing distinct was heard, though Girdley thought he could distinguish the faint sound of Indian war-whoops.

Ocular evidence that something tragical had occurred was soon vouchsafed them. The hunter first noticed a brassy look at one point against the sky, as though the sun was sending a grotesque reflection there; but the light changed color and form, and grew more distinct until Lona exclaimed:

"The Mission is on fire!"

The only reply was a sigh from Isabel.

"They are all dead now," added Mulligan's daughter, in a hard voice.

"That don't follow," said Girdley. "Bloodrod is not the man to be easily disposed of."

Lona moved from Isabel's side and raised the second pair of oars, which had thus far been lying unused.

"Let us pull back," she said.

"Back!" echoed the hunter.

"Yes."

"Are you mad?"

"No; but why should we stay out here, peacefully and beyond danger, when men and women may be needing our help there. See the fire shoot up! The allies have done their work and the Mission people are stamped out of existence. Some of them may still live, however, and we have no right to remain here."

Girdley knew of whom she was thinking and framed his reply accordingly.

"Bloodrod was our leader; he gave us directions and we must follow them."

Lona dropped the oars with a deep sigh, but made no reply, and all looked in silence again. The light which had at first been dim had taken accurate form and resolved itself into an unmistakable pillar of fire. It arose in a broad

belt, flecked by bright sparks and wreaths of smoke, and seemed like a gigantic finger pointing to Heaven to bear witness against man and his crimes.

Isabel knew the Mission was doomed, and her feelings were varied. The place had been her home for over a year, but she had never loved it ardently. She had not sought the wilderness and missionary work with enthusiasm, but as many other women engage in like work; because she had had trouble, and in her pique at the world's harshness she had resolved to abandon it.

Her self-inflicted exile had often proved painful, though she worked well to teach the Indian children that certain eccentric characters were letters of the alphabet, not pictures of bugs and spiders, and she would now have felt little regret had she known that the inmates were saved.

But no; everything pointed to the probability that dead men and women, scalped and mutilated, were lying here and there among burning cabins.

The other occupant of the boat entertained the same fear, and, as Girdley grew calmer, he noticed that the wind was blowing from them, which would account for no more rifle-shots being heard.

The hunter finally remembered that Bloodrod had directed him to put as great a distance as possible between the Mission and the boat, and he resumed rowing and the boat glided down the river.

To his surprise, Lona also began using her oars.

"You need not work," he said, gently.

"The boat is made for four oars, and I will not be a mere burden. Go on, and I will show you I am not that."

She spoke with perfect calmness, and he realized that her nerves were tensely strung; she had not ceased to think of Bloodrod, but she had gone to another state when she could work as well as a man.

He objected no more, and they rowed together.

"I cannot understand what has become of St. Cyr," he said, as he again looked in vain for the Frenchman and his boats.

"Wherever he is, he will not come to the slaughter," said Lona. "Do you suppose the Hudson Bay Company would uphold an agent who did such a thing? No; St. Cyr will not run any such risk. He has played fast and loose with the Indians, but he will keep out of the affair, and, by and by, when it is heard of, men will say it is another Indian outbreak; they will get all the blame."

"Bloodrod prophesied the last part."

"The Hudson Bay men get all the gain, the Indians all the blame."

"I am strongly of the opinion that if the Hudson Bay Company knew what St. Cyr is about, he would lose his official head."

"Pity he can't lose his head in reality," Lona returned.

They rowed steadily down the river, and as they went the pillar of fire behind them began to lose its brightness. There was no great amount of fuel for it to feed upon, and all the cabins seemed to have been started at once.

Girdley felt a weight of responsibility upon him which he would rather have shared with a more experienced man. He knew not where to look for danger. St. Cyr and his party might be anywhere by the way, waiting for their deluded allies to complete the massacre, or, if the little boat floated safely on through the night, there was no knowing what dangers would menace it when day dawned.

He had a presentiment that the lawless leaders of the allies would not willingly see such choice booty as Isabel and Lona escape, and if they tried to find them the odds would be alarmingly great in their favor.

As for Hotspur Hugh and the trappers, he did not expect them for several hours yet.

The thoughts of the three were centered on one point as Lona suddenly ceased rowing.

"Listen!" she said.

"What is it?"

"I heard the sound of oars."

Girdley raised his own blades, and then all easily heard the sound of rowing. Whoever the unknown boatman was, however, he was some distance away and at their rear.

"Who can it be?" Isabel asked, anxiously.

"There was another boat at the Mission," began Lona, hesitatingly, and then left her sentence unfinished.

Girdley read her thoughts, however.

"Perhaps Bloodrod is following us," he said.

"Can't we pull near the bank and wait until we learn?" she suggested.

"I'm afraid the plan is not a wise one. He especially directed us to row straight on. 'Pull for your lives,' were his words, you remember."

"But he would not have us row away from him."

"We have no proof that the unknown boatman is he; indeed, the chances are against it. If it be he, he is able to care for himself, and common prudence requires us to go on. 'Pull for your lives,' said Bloodrod, and I will try to obey him."

So saying the hunter dipped his oars and pulled away again, nor did Lona remonstrate, but the unknown boatman was not so easily shaken off. Whether they hurried or delayed, the regular dip of his own oars was always to be heard, and the idea gradually forced itself upon each one of the trio that they were being deliberately dogged by some one. That it was Bloodrod was not at all probable.

Resolved to test the matter, both Girdley and Lona pulled rapidly for at least five minutes. Then they lifted their oars and listened.

Dip! dip! dip! The sound came exactly as before; no nearer, no further away; no quicker, no slower.

"I don't know what to make of it," said Girdley, with a troubled manner.

"It must be an enemy," said Isabel.

"Yes, but why does he pursue such a course?"

"That is a mystery."

"I can only suspect that he fears to appear to us singly, but is keeping us in view until, finding reinforcements, he can safely attack. Ha!"

The hunter spoke excitedly, and with reason, for a boat, heavily loaded with men, suddenly appeared directly in their course and but a few feet away.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TRACK OF THE TEMPEST.

MORNING!

The sun rose in an almost unclouded sky, calm, serene, undisturbed. There was nothing peculiar about the king of day. Its beams fell on the forest, with the broad Columbia winding through it like a vast band of silver; and on the mountain, the plain and the lake. All these seemed as calm as the great orb which looked down upon them; Old Sol saw no change made during the temporary reign of his consort, Luna, the queen of night.

Stay! here is one point where there is a change. Yesterday there were cabins in this little clearing by the river's bank. Now there are none. Desolation is there. Not one wall arises to mark the place where stood the Mission. There are black, shapeless sticks; red, glowing piles of timber; smoke curling upward—and this is all.

The Mission is in ruins. The flames have fed until there is little more to feed upon. The piles of coals are hot and glowing, and they still smoke, but the fire has run its course.

About the g'dae, outside the cabins or between them; sometimes within reach of the flames; are several things which at first seem mere bundles, but which, on closer view, resolve themselves into human bodies.

They are no more than bodies. Their very positions indicate that. Were further proof needed, the blood upon their persons and the aspect of their faces furnish it.

The storm has come, and here is its track; here is ruin, desolation, death.

Just to the north of the clearing are signs of life, however. There, men are encamped and eating breakfast. They are bronzed, hardy fellows, who look fit to cope with any man or beast which roves the forests of the Columbia.

One of their number goes to the edge of the clearing and, leaning on his rifle, looks on the ruined Mission. Another person, younger, slighter of form, with the face of an Indian, walks to his side.

As they stand there together, we recognize Bloodrod and Hotspur Hugh.

"There is nothing left," said the young Indian.

"Nothing but ashes."

"But the Molacks have paid dearly for their work," and the Will-o'-the-Wisp pointed to the bodies in the glade.

"I half pity them," said the spy. "Mulligan and St. Cyr led them on with artful words and pledges of aid, and then deserted them at the crisis. Had their pledges been kept, our victory would not have been so easy a one. Thank Heaven, however, it is as it is."

"St. Cyr is a dog," said Hugh, with a dark look on his face. "He plots and then throws all the blame on the Indian. Let him take care that his deeds do not recoil on himself."

"I have no love for the man, and I intend to give him a lesson. I shall send Just and the women to Astoria, and with the rest of my men take the trail in earnest. Brick Rose's gang must be broken up, and a lesson given St. Cyr."

Further conversation was interrupted as a boat came shooting rapidly up the river, driven by four stalwart oarsmen. They landed at the clearing, and one came at once to Bloodrod.

"What luck, Burr?" the spy asked, a look of eagerness perceptible in his manner.

"Can't say it's overly good, cap'n," replied the man, who was one of the trappers.

"Why not?"

"I ain't found the fugeratives."

"No?"

"No, but I found their boat."

Bloodrod started.

"Explain!" he said, tersely.

"We found the boat kitched and held in a recess in the bank, but she was empty. More'n that, one oar was broke, an' that was blood in the bottom of the boat."

Bloodrod was looking at the trapper with a face fixed in an expression of horror.

"The trail—the trail!" he muttered.

"Thar wa'n't none. Whoever did the mischief went away by water. I opine they met a boat-load o' Hudson Bay men, an' that they got used durned tough. Mebbe, though, ther gal is all right; mebbe ther blood was ther man's—Girdley did ye call him?"

The last theory was added because Burr Rodney saw the expression on his leader's face, but Bloodrod scarcely heard what was said. He had sent these men to look for Girdley, Isabel and Lona; this was the report brought back, and it was enough to strike the spy heavily. An abandoned boat, a broken oar, a blood-stain on the formerly clean wood—there was surely enough cause for fear.

Hotspur touched the spy's arm.

"I will go and look for them," he quietly said.

"Wait! We will soon go together. The men are finishing breakfast. I'll break camp as soon as possible."

He turned and strode to a thicket near at hand, and then Mr. Just and his teachers—all except Isabel—came out. They looked weary, alarmed and helpless, but were in no way injured.

"You will prepare to leave at once," Bloodrod tersely said. "An escort will be furnished you, and I think you will get through to Astoria safely."

"We can never thank you sufficiently—" began Mr. Just, but the spy interrupted him.

"Don't try. This is time for action, not words. One question, however: Do you know what became of Obed Leetcomb last night?"

"No; I did not see him after the attack."

"No doubt he tried hard to look out for his precious skin, but as the Molacks are not his friends, I suspect he found the way of the transgressor hard. Enough, we go in five minutes."

Preparations were soon made. Boats rocked by the bank, and in these the whole party embarked. Bloodrod had detailed ten men to take the Mission people to Astoria. This party occupied two boats and were to make the best of their way down the river.

In the remaining boats, which numbered three, went the men Bloodrod had selected to keep with him. With these men he intended to punish Brick Rose and St. Cyr, but the first duty was to find Girdley and his companions—or learn their fate.

The entire party embarked and pushed away from the bank, and the little clearing rapidly faded from view. Mr. Just looked back with moist eyes. There he had labored for four years, trying to lift the Indians from their low estate. A sincerer reformer than he never existed, and no man could justly be his enemy. His whole heart had been in his chosen work, and every inch of progress had been noted and rejoiced over as of value to those for whom he labored.

But the end had come. The few rude cabins which he had learned to love were in ashes, and for a time his work was done. Even then, however, he had vague hopes of resuming at the old place when the storm passed away.

Bloodrod looked not behind, but ahead. He thought almost wholly of the trio he had sent away in the boat. He regretted now that he had sent them away, but he had acted for what he thought the best.

They had certainly escaped a wild scene by going.

When he sent them off Bloodrod felt as though he was bidding farewell to all he cared for in the world. It was hard to see them go and himself remain behind. Lona drew him like a magnet, but he felt that duty required him elsewhere.

He went back to the Mission as to a funeral house. He went back feeling that he might never leave.

Mr. Just had collected the teachers in the largest building, and there they were waiting for the end with the fortitude of martyrs. Bloodrod remained outside, with the bravery of a wise and fearless man.

The shock soon came. The Molacks had gathered, and impatient for the feast of plunder, they sprang forward in a body. Bloodrod shot one down in his tracks, and then, darting inside the largest building, closed and fastened the door.

The Indians were temporarily checked, but they had work enough elsewhere. In five minutes all the small cabins were blazing, and then dry wood was piled around the large one and set on fire.

The whole building was crackling over the little party when there was an American cheer; the sound of rifles; and the Molacks were scattered by the charge of the trappers led by Hotspur Hugh.

To hasten their movements the youth had led them for some distance by land, by a road best known to him. They arrived just in time. The Molacks were scattered and the Mission people saved, but the cabins themselves were doomed. They burned to the ground, but their light fell on the lifeless forms of some of those who had fired them.

Bloodrod at once took command of the trappers, and four of them he sent to find Girdley and the girls. We have seen them return from their unsuccessful mission.

The reunited party moved down the river at a good pace until they reached the place where Burr Rodney had found the boat. Here the two halves separated, Mr. Just and his escort moving on toward Astoria, while Bloodrod and the others settled down to the task of finding Girdley and the girls.

The boat seemed to tell a tragical story, with the red stain at the bottom and the broken oar, but all the trappers coincided with Burr's theory that only Girdley had been killed. Isabel and Lona, they declared, were doubtless in the hands of the unknown.

Had they known where the fight took place their task would have been much easier, but the boat might have floated a mile after being abandoned. Still, the only way was to look for trails along the bank, and the trappers set about the work with the skill of their craft.

Success crowned their efforts sooner than was expected, and one of the men came to Bloodrod with a report.

"I reckon ther sign is found. Men hav landed over yon, an' then gone still furder on, but they stayed long enough ter make a grave. In that, I reckon you'll find young Girdley buried!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SPOILS OF VICTORY.

NOON!

On the top of a ridge a camp was pitched, and, around a succession of fires, men were gathered and engaged in eating their dinner. All were of white skin, yet they were not the American trappers.

Somewhat apart from the rest were Basil St. Cyr and Brick Rose. They were eating in silence, but each glanced now and then toward one side where, side by side, Isabel Gray and Lona Mulligan sat on a log. They were prisoners. That much was certain, for both were bound, and their expressions were not less plainly signs of captivity.

There was an awkwardness in the manner of St. Cyr and Rose which was at once apparent, yet not a word had passed between them that was not friendly. Each, however, felt that such a rupture was near at hand.

"I do not think I will remain with you much longer," said the Frenchman, carefully approaching the subject. "Thanks to our Molack allies the victory is won—or we suppose it so—and we must all get back to our dens and let the red-skins hear the curses of the angry Bostons. Well, well, why should they kick? The Mission is in ashes, and, I suppose the reds have the scalps of Just and the rest."

"They ought to be satisfied."

"They will have to be. As for us, we have the rarest spoils of victory."

He motioned toward Isabel and Lona and Rose briefly answered in the affirmative.

"After dinner," St. Cyr added, "I will take Isabel and return to my own command."

Rose made no reply, but seemed intent on his food.

"Some day, when you have tamed the spirit of the fair Lona, I trust you will run over and see Isabel and me."

"Perhaps," said Rose, laconically.

He ate rapidly, and St. Cyr eyed him narrowly. Both knew that trouble would follow the Frenchman's attempt to take the ex-teacher away. He was resolved to have her, while Rose had good reasons for not desiring him to take her. Not that Rose himself desired her; he pronounced her too lily-like for his taste; but he remembered that, at the conference at Jake Mulligan's cabin, the whisky-trader had said that the only thing he desired from the victory was this same teacher.

Now, Brick was in a quandary. He knew that Mulligan would storm loud and long if he allowed Isabel to go, while, on the other hand, he knew it was dangerous to oppose a man who possessed the power St. Cyr wielded in Oregon.

He had rarely experienced greater relief than when he saw the whisky-trader himself come striding into camp, but one look was enough to show that that gentleman was not in his usual amiable mood. He confronted his allies with a scowl and some preliminary profanity, which need not be recorded.

"Wal, you're rank p'ison at engineerin' a job, ain't you?" he cried.

"What's the matter, mon ami?" placidly asked St. Cyr.

"What about ther Mission?"

"Burned down."

"An' ther Mission gang?"

"I suppose Naika has their scalps by this time."

"Then you s'pose mighty wrong. Ther Mission is burn; ther reds did that all right; but afore they could gobble ther inmates, down on 'em come a gang o' Boston trappers, an' them reds just got thrashed ther wu'st way."

Mulligan described the fight with an air which told what a bitter disappointment it was to him,

and the three men then went into a committee of the whole to discuss it. Mulligan's criticism was unjust, for his allies had followed the plan formed by the three; but he now said that they ought to have been near enough to have assisted the Indians when the latter proved to be outnumbered—an opinion St. Cyr and Rose by no means shared.

The discussion began warmly but ended more amicably, though no one was satisfied. Their broad plan of sweeping the Bostons out of Oregon had ended in an attack on one weak settlement—and that attack a failure—and they were beginning to learn that conspiracies are difficult things to manage.

Mulligan's good nature was in a great measure restored when he learned that Isabel and Lona were prisoners.

When Lona announced to Bloodrod how the Mission was to be taken, she merely repeated the plan as she heard it formed in her father's cabin when Naika was present. This plan, we already know, was not carried out by St. Cyr and Brick Rose.

The latter, however, was out in his boats to intercept the Mission people if they tried to flee to Astoria, and Girdley and his passengers ran directly into this party. The demand for his surrender was not heeded by the hunter, and he made a desperate fight, shooting one of Rose's men and breaking an oar over the head of a second; but when the girls had both been seized he saw that he was only making a vain fight, so he sprang overboard.

All Rose's efforts to find him proved fruitless, but, as they buried their fallen man in the wood, they swore to be revenged for his loss.

"And we'll do it," said Rose, darkly, as he told the story to Mulligan. "We took that chap in and nursed him through a rank sickness, and then he promised to go to the Mission to take your girl's place as a spy. How did he keep his promise? Wal, last night's work shows. There's no more to add, except that if we get our claws on Mister Girdley again, he hangs!"

"Correct. String him up. Hang ev'ry Boston you kin get your hands on," said Mulligan, surlily.

"Better lay low for awhile," advised St. Cyr. "I am going to take my tigers North and play the innocent until this affair blows over. It won't be so unpleasant taking a few weeks rest, mon ami, for I'm going to take the charming Isabel along to soothe my hours of solitude."

The whisky-trader started.

"What's that?"

St. Cyr calmly repeated his remark.

"Do ye forget that I spoke fur her?" said Mulligan, slowly.

"I remember nothing of the kind, monsieur," said Basil, lightly. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I did tell ye. 'Twas at the pow-wow held at my cabin. Sez I 'My shar' o' the game is the teacher, Isobel Gray.' Brick Rose heard me."

"Ay," said that man.

"Nonsense, my dear Jacob; you said nothing of the kind. Bah! what does a man of your age want of such a doll as that? You have a daughter, yourself, as large as she is. You, as a lover! Ha! ha!"

St. Cyr laughed, but Mulligan did not. His dark face was overcast with a scowl, and with one of his hands he pulled up fragments of the moss on which he was lying, in an ugly but unconscious way.

"I'm a plain man," he said, "an' I like plain talk. You're drawin' the fancy now, an' you're laughin' at me. That don't alter the facts o' the case. I said ez I claim, an' I kin prove it by Brick Rose. Tharfore, I claim the gal."

"Nonsense!"

"It ain't nonsense," said Mulligan, surlily.

"I say it is, for you're too old a man to be a Cupid. Come, if you are in earnest, forget your foolish fancy and say no more. It is my wish to have the girl, and I can't give her up so easily."

The two men looked at each other steadily. St. Cyr was calm and persuasive; Mulligan, angry, excited and bitter. He had the stubborn will of a mule, and never gave a point from fear, but he remembered that the Frenchman was the representative of the Hudson Bay Fur Company, a power whose good will he desired above all things. He was thus placed between two fires.

St. Cyr, on the other hand, knew his power, but he also remembered that he was in a camp where he had not a follower, and every man would obey Mulligan's orders.

A long discussion followed, during which both men ill concealed their bad temper under a thin mask of friendship. The whisky-trader, in particular, was in an ugly mood. He knew St. Cyr was lying when he pretended not to remember the conversation in his cabin, and he felt like settling the matter with his knife then and there.

Calmer inclinations prevailed, however, and he finally gave way, though with a bad grace, and Rose, who knew him well, suspected that the end was not yet.

The Frenchman did not delay a great while after his point was gained, for he feared that

Mulligan would change his mind. He said several pleasant and friendly things in his bland manner, and then prepared for departure.

When the girls learned that they were to be separated fresh consternation seized them. Captivity with Rose was bad enough, but under the new arrangement they saw worse and their courage failed them. Both appealed to Mulligan and Rose by turns, asking that they might be kept together, and where they were, but these men stood back and watched in sullen silence.

Mulligan, however, seeing the force St. Cyr was obliged to use to tear Isabel from her friend, fingered his knife in a way more suggestive than promising to the Frenchman.

The latter was gone at last, forcing his unwilling prisoner to walk beside him, and Lona bitterly reproached her father for his share in the work. The latter, however, took Rose aside.

"The frog-eater travels alone."

"Yes," said Rose.

"An' ther way is dark an' lonely."

"Yes."

"An' my knife is sharp."

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I don't allow any two-legged critter ter cheat me out o' what's mine, an' either frog-eater dies by the trail, I reckon the Hudson Bay Company will never know whose hand laid him low."

And Mulligan tapped the knife in his belt.

CHAPTER XXXV.

BRIMSTONE JAKE'S TRAIL.

BRICK ROSE could not misunderstand what was in his companion's mind, but he was by no means pleased. He knew the Hudson Bay Company would never send another man to their section who was so ready to play fast and loose for a little money as St. Cyr; he had been a good friend to them, and Brick did not think it wise to give up a good business for the best woman that ever lived.

He tried to turn Mulligan from his purpose, but the latter was fixed. Revengeful in the extreme, he was always ready to remove the man who misused him, as he considered St. Cyr had done, and now that the idea had possessed him that he could kill him silently and safely by the trail, he resolved to do it.

He was Rose's superior, and the latter gave way when he saw that there was no help for it.

Then the whisky-trader bade good-day to all and pretended to set out for his cabin. He left Lona behind, calmly giving her to Brick as though she had been a horse, and then he slouched idly out of camp.

Once clear, his whole manner changed; he became keen and alert; and, striking into a rapid walk, he soon covered half a mile of ground. Then he paused, looked around him and ended by uttering a peculiar whistle. It was effective, for Brimstone Jake immediately emerged from a thicket near at hand.

"Oh! you're hyar," said Mulligan. "I was afeerd you'd be late. Wal done!"

"I'm a Roarer," said Brimstone, quietly.

"You're a man o' nerve, too, I take it."

"You ought to know, Mul."

"I do. Jake, thar's work ter do; a man ter lay out. I hev been sorely misused. D'y'e remember that at the cabin when the conference was, I said I'd resarve the Gray gal fur my share?"

"Yes."

"I've been robbed; by the Eternal, I've been robbed!" cried the whisky-trader, smiting his hand on his thigh. "St. Cyr hez tuk her away, whether-or-no, an' gone."

Brimstone Jake was no longer a sleepy man; that little mask had been assumed to aid Mulligan, and by means of it he had played the spy on Mulligan's best friends; he was as keen and acute as any one, but he needed an explanation.

The whisky-trader gave it, storming like a madman as he did so, and then he added:

"Now, look ye, Brimstone Jake, I don't allow any man ter use me that way. Ther gal was mine by all right, an' when Mister St. Cyr stole her he sealed his own doom—he did that. He don't take her home to his camp alive, now you bet!"

Brimstone Jake looked thoughtful, and suggested that it might not be wise to kill such an influential man as St. Cyr, but Mulligan overruled him as he had done Brick Rose.

More than that, the lesser villain agreed to help his leader.

"Good!" said Mulligan. "Now hear my plan. St. Cyr has got ter pass through Ribbon Swamp an', o' course, he'll cross at the Log Trail. You know how dark and pokerish it is ther. Wal, that'll make a good place fur the frog-eater's grave."

Brimstone Jake looked grave and thoughtful, and his manner was absent as he replied:

"Ay, ay."

"When we git ther I'll lay in wait wbar the trail teches dry land, while you kin come up behind, an' take him ther et he gits scared an' turns back. S-e!"

"Ay," said Brimstone Jake.

"Work it car'ful, old pard, an' make no mistake. B'ar in mind that I'll be jest whar ther

land rises. You foller sharp, an' es ther critter turns, lend him one with yer knife."

Brimstone Jake again agreed, but he seemed to feel that his master was mournful, for he suddenly aroused, and with a glimmer of humor, observed that he was a Roarer.

The two lost little more time, but set off to intercept the Frenchman and his prisoner.

Ribbon Swamp, to which Mulligan referred, was a long, narrow strip of low land, which was so mucky and treacherous that it was dangerous to cross except at one point where the Hudson Bay trappers had made a surface bridge of logs. This was the so-called "Log Trail."

The route taken by the would-be assassins was shorter than that St. Cyr had started upon, and they had no doubt but they would have time enough to execute their purpose.

On the west side of the swamp they separated, Brimstone Jake taking to ambush, and Mulligan crossing the Log Trail to the other side.

It was a gloomy place. The footing was good enough, for the trappers had done their work well, but owing to the heavy growth of swamp-trees and bushes, daylight never penetrated there with full strength. On the present occasion the sun was going down and the trail was fast getting dark.

The whisky-trader crossed and took his position at the further side. Like a panther, he crouched in the bushes, in such a position that he could spring up at a moment's notice, and drive his ready knife home in St. Cyr's body.

There he waited, patiently at first, and then with many a curse on the Frenchman's slow movements. The minutes passed on; the shadows grew deeper in the forest—Log Trail was as dark as night. And night came, too, after a short time, and the shadows deepened and darkened, the day-birds ceased to be heard, and the night-birds began to move about.

But St. Cyr did not come.

"Curse ther frog-eater!" said Mulligan; "I'd like ter know what's struck him."

But though he waited longer he did not see St. Cyr. Then his patience became wholly exhausted.

"Ef he won't come hyer, durned ef I don't go an' meet him," he said.

He arose and walked along the Log Trail, but he had gone only a few yards when he heard a sound at the other side. He listened eagerly.

"Footsteps!" he muttered. "He's comin'—I'll fix him now!"

He dropped down by the side of the trail, and lay as still as though turned to stone; but his keen knife was ready.

The footsteps came nearer, and though the intense darkness prevented the assassin from seeing anything, he was filled with fierce joy. He was about to reward the Frenchman for having played fast-and-loose with him, and to win Isobel Gray.

The pedestrian came nearer until he could barely make out his form.

"Ther gal's on ther furder side; that's good," Mulligan thought. "Hyar goes!"

He partially arose and then lunged forward, aiming the deadly knife at his victim's side and throwing his whole weight after the stroke. His aim was true. The knife went home with great force; the stricken man started, cried out faintly and then fell down in a heap.

Mulligan leaped up to seize the girl, but though his arms were eagerly outstretched, he saw her not, nor was there a sound along the trail to indicate that she was anywhere near.

The assassin stood alone in darkness and silence. The swamp seemed like a veritable grave. No sound arose, while the distant cry of the night-birds sounded weird and unnatural. Even the air seemed heavy, oppressive and chill to the murderer. He shivered, and then looked at the motionless heap on the logs beside him.

"It's cur'us; mighty cur'us," he muttered, brushing his hand over his face. "I don't understand. I hope I ain't—"

He ceased and, kneeling beside his victim, struck a match. It seemed a generation before the composition would vanish and the wood burn clearly, but, at last, it flared up and the light fell full on the stricken man's face.

Then Mulligan uttered a hoarse cry.

"Brimstone Jake!" he exclaimed. "Brimstone Jake, dead!"

Ay, Brimstone Jake; for on the damp logs lay that man; the body only, for one look at his wide-open, staring eyes was enough to show his ally that he was dead. No need to examine the long, cruel gash in his side.

Mulligan stared at him as though he beheld a ghost, and the feeble match went out and left him still staring.

"Dead!" he whispered, huskily. "Brimstone Jake, dead!"

The minutes wore on. The night-birds sounded their cries above and beyond the swamp, but none came near the Log Trail. There the silence was awful. It seemed to brand the brain of the whisky-trader as with a hot iron. He had lived an evil life and deserved good of

no one, even as he did no good, but between him and the dead man there had been a strange bond of sympathy. For him, alone, of all human beings, Mulligan had cared, and now he lay dead at the feet of his friend—and his assassin.

"Brimstone Jake, dead!"

Again and again, dazed, stupid, miserable, the whisky-trader muttered thus, but, anon, his wits returned somewhat and he comprehended how it had occurred. Brimstone Jake had tired of watching where he had been posted, and had set out to join his comrade just as the latter started in an opposite direction. At first Mulligan wondered that he should have been so rash as to venture forward without announcing his coming, but he then remembered that he had laid stress on the fact that he should be at the further end of the Log Trail.

"It's all my fault!" he muttered.

He soon aroused to action and bore the body across the Trail and to a place on the knoll beyond, where the soil was dry and light. There he scooped out a grave with his knife and hands and laid the Roarer in it; and when he had replaced the earth he covered all with heavy stones and his work was done.

Having more matches he examined the ground east of the Trail and found that St. Cyr and his prisoner had passed over before their arrival.

"Yas, he's safe fur ther time, but I ain't done with him yit. I don't allow no such work ez his, an' now he's got ther blood o' Brimstone Jake at his door. Poor old Roarer! he war ther truest man I ever knowed, an' I'll revenge his death. Bas'l St. Cyr, ye might be ther heir-apparently ter ther throne o' England, but I'd bunt ye down like ther wolf ye be. I sw'ar it!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LEMAIRE SEES A FAMILIAR FACE.

EVENING!

On a hillside a camp is pitched, and men are gathered around blazing fires; a hearty, happy-go-lucky crowd. Yet, they are neither the American trappers nor Brick Rose's men. They are a more famous company; they are of an organization whose fame has spread all over the United States and British America.

They are, in brief, St. Cyr's division of the Hudson Bay Fur Company.

The men looked like competent upholders of the reputation the trappers of the company, as a whole, had won. Hardy fellows who dared extreme cold, the Indians and rival fur companies without a thought of fear, they were among the most remarkable men who have ever trod the soil of North America.

Near one of the fires St. Cyr sat eating his supper. He had just brought Isabel Gray in as a captive, and when once in his own camp he became aware that he was very hungry. He was now satisfying his hunger on a juicy steak.

While thus engaged Jules Lemaire approached and sat down near him. The two men had met since the leader's return, but had held little conversation.

"What have you been doing now?" curtly asked Jules.

"What do you mean?"

"You brought in a prisoner."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She's to be the daughter of the brigade and—my wife."

Lemaire did not answer, but with his chin resting in one hand, looked into the darkness long and earnestly. St. Cyr looked at him sharply, but the man's face bore its usual moody expression and he could read it no further. Lemaire grew more notional and eccentric every day, it seemed to Basil, and he was thinking that he had probably forgotten all about the girl when Jules suddenly spoke.

"No good will come of it," he said.

St. Cyr started.

"Of what?"

"Of bringing the girl here."

"Why not?"

"The talk about a daughter for the brigade is all folly. It has been heard of, now and then, but the idea is more romantic than practical. Were this woman plain of face, it might work now. She is not plain, however; she is handsome; and handsome women make trouble among men. This girl will ruin the brigade."

The speaker threw an energy into his manner which disturbed the captain. He cared something for the good will of Jules Lemaire. The man was not a valuable member of the brigade; in fact, he was nearly useless; but he had been put there by an influential officer of the company, and Basil had always tried to be on good terms with him.

Now, it occurred to him for the first time that this same eccentric man might make trouble for him by using his tongue too freely when they reached the settlements.

He therefore began a plausible explanation and excuse, using all his blandness. He watched for the effect, but, as before, Lemaire's face told no tales. When he was through, however, Jules spoke quietly.

"Where have I seen that face before?"

"What face?"

"The girl's;" and Lemaire moved his hand toward Isabel.

"At the Mission, possibly."

"I was never there. No; it was further back—weeks, months, possibly years. Who knows? I don't. Yet, the face is familiar. Where have I seen it before?"

"You have probably seen some one who resembles her."

"I think not; I believe I have seen this girl before. But when, and where? The likeness is on my mind; there is no mistaking it; but how did it get there?"

"I hold to my opinion that it is a case of mere resemblance."

"You are wrong. I have seen her face before."

Lemaire spoke confidently, and St. Cyr looked a little troubled.

"Were you ever in Montreal?" he asked.

"No."

The captain breathed freer. Jules had troubled him for a moment, but, after all, it was but the fancy of a diseased brain. For Lemaire was deranged. St. Cyr had almost daily proof of that. He did and said strange things; he forgot what happened and imagined what never happened; and he had a way of sitting and staring long at vacancy which made one of the trappers, whose fancy was prolific, call him "The Bastile," from the idea that in just such a grim, immovable way the old French prison sat for years.

This *sobriquet* was never spoken before either Lemaire or St. Cyr.

One of the former's peculiarities appeared when Bloodrod was captured. Jules had always refused to cross swords with Captain St. Cyr, although carrying one by his side, and it was supposed he knew little or nothing about using one; but, lo! when he set upon Bloodrod he had shown remarkable skill. Since then, his sword had never been unsheathed.

St. Cyr finished his supper, lit his pipe and lay back for a smoke. Lemaire did not seem inclined to say more, and he certainly had no desire to lead him on. He felt tired and troubled, so he sought the universal cure for these ills—his pipe. And as the smoke floated away his mind grew clearer and calmer, and his temper improved.

Smoking ended, he arose and approached Isabel. She was sitting alone, weary and hopeless, and her attitude would have touched the heart of a man less lost to human feeling and shame than he; but he saw only his captive, with whom he was well pleased.

"Mademoiselle Gray," he said, blandly, as she did not seem to notice him.

"Well?"

"I have come for a short conversation with you."

"You may as well go away; I have seen and heard too much of you already."

"Mon Dieu, you are cruel as the grave!" he said, affecting great sorrow.

"Sir, let us understand each other. We are enemies, and we can never be less. Do you suppose I can forget the drama of the past, especially when it is recalled to my mind each day by new deeds of infamy?"

"St. Catherine, have you no tact, mademoiselle? Ah! women are so rude and brusque. A man would choose his words better. 'Tis my boast that I can smile on a man as I cut his throat. By you—ah! you call me infamous simply because I have cared for myself above others. Why not? Isn't it the law of life?"

"I do not care to argue with you, nor to speak with you in any way. We have been enemies for years, as you well know, and I shall go to my grave without any better feeling toward you than I now have."

"Mon Dieu! and I love you so!" he said, mockingly.

"Wretch!"

"Thank you, dear. Your loving eyes touch my heart."

Isabel closed her lips tightly. She already knew the folly of trying to talk with this man as she would with other men. He was simply a heartless, scoffing fiend, and words were thrown away on him.

Her silence did not discourage him, and he talked steadily for some time, only ceasing when it became clear that she could not be made to talk.

"You use bad taste, my charming Isabel," he then said, as he rose, "and I am inclined to believe you will yet be sorry for it. Woman may use the rights of a queen when she is in power, but you have no power here. I rule; you are as weak as straw. Beware that you don't cut me too deeply!"

There was that in his face which made the girl shiver, but, just then, a man came to summon St. Cyr and he left his prisoner. He was surprised when he knew why he was summoned. There was a new-comer in camp; a man who was mud-covered from head to foot; whose garments were wet and torn; and who had the general appearance of a badly used-up man.

Yet, there was something familiar about him, and the captain looked in bewilderment.

"Do you know me?" the new-comer asked, in a feeble voice.

"I think I have seen you, but I can't place you."

"No wonder, for I am a mere wreck. My name is Obed Leechcomb."

"Ha!"

"Yes, and I have come to you for protection. I am a mere wreck, as I said before, and I have no place to lay my head. The accursed Indians have chased me through swamp and over hill, and I have fled for my life until I am nearly dead. Nor is this all. I believe Bloodrod is hunting for me. Bloodrod! He's the worst of all; a perfect fiend. I ask you to be my friend and keep Bloodrod off, and, in return I will do you a great favor."

The last words made no impression on the captain, for he saw that Leechcomb was badly upset mentally. That he had been pursued, as he claimed, by the Indians was not at all probable; that he believed he had, was very clear. From the time he suddenly disappeared when the Mission was attacked, he had probably been wandering at random, blindly and alarmed, and he was now little more than a "mere wreck," as he well expressed it.

But St. Cyr, who had known him once in Montreal, was disposed to help him now, regardless of his promise to reward him. This part was not forgotten by Leechcomb, however, and when St. Cyr would have led him to the fire to eat and drink, he persisted in talking.

"You remember the girl—Isabel Dalton?" he said, with an eager air.

"What of her?"

"It's all of her. She is now in Oregon, and I can tell you that about her which will make you anxious to find her. Ay, find her; hold her tight; keep her wholly for your own; for she's a prize. Help me away from the fiends who pursue me, St. Cyr, and I'll tell you the secret I know about Isabel Dalton!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A LAIR AND THE LION.

ANOTHER day dawned.

The sun was still low in the eastern sky when a man approached the secret valley near the Giant's Arm; the home of the Banded Brothers. He did not go with the freedom of one at home, nor yet with the boldness of an invited guest, but crept from bush to bush, and from tree to tree, nearing the entrance to the valley both slowly and secretly.

This man was Neal Girdley.

He, too, appeared to have seen hard usage, though he was not in so deplorable a plight as was Leechcomb. He had not wandered widely and wildly, but his adventures and submersion in the river had proven in a certain degree a relapse to his regaining strength, and he looked as though he might again be as bad off as when he was taken in and nursed by the Banded Brothers.

By he knew they would never again take him in as a friend. The fight on the river, during which he shot one of them, had settled all that, and he was wise to know that if he was captured his life would not be worth a breath of air.

By an unlucky chance, he had not discovered that American trappers were in the vicinity. He had spent a considerable part of his time lying in the thickets and beside of logs, for he had been too ill to move about a great deal, but he had made his way back to the Mission. There he found only ruins. The bodies of the Molacks had been thrown in the river, but the blood remained on the ground, and the hunter was forced to the conclusion that all the inmates, including Bloodrod, had been killed.

Then he decided that the rescue of Isabel and Lona depended solely on him, and he set out to accomplish the difficult work. He knew they had been taken by Brick Rose, and he was confident they would be taken to the secret valley.

Thus it was that he was so cautiously approaching it; resolved to rescue Isabel or die in trying, yet, really, not in fit bodily condition for the work.

He had some doubts about his ability to penetrate to the valley, not having the gifts of Hotspur Hugh as a climber and acrobat, but he was in a mood when men are turned aside by no difficulty until it is met and succumbed to.

Reaching the valley, he reconnoitered. He found a guard on duty at the narrow entrance, and that place seemed to vanish from the list of possibilities. He must go some other way, but how to do it was a problem he turned over in his mind again and again without meeting with any solution.

Luck finally favored him, however. He saw the guard nod at his post; he waited until he slept; he crept past and then hastened down the steep path.

He was in the valley at last.

Caution now became imperatively necessary, and he strained every nerve and every sense as he went on. More than this, his own safety was at stake; he must save the girls or they were lost, he argued.

Poor fellow! he reasoned with a head which was not then fit for reasoning, and when he thought himself the most sagacious he was running the greatest danger.

He had a clear idea as to where the prisoners would be taken, and he made his way through the bushes to a cabin he well remembered. It was the one where he was kept during his illness, and where Hotspur Hugh had been detected spying upon Rose.

Girdley approached the window and looked inside. The first room was empty. He hesitated for a moment and was half-inclined to enter, but wiser counsel prevailed, and he settled back to watch.

He was crouching in the bushes when he saw Rose approaching from another part of the valley. He was striding forward rapidly, and from the first Girdley was impressed by the belief that something of importance was about to occur.

The valley chief entered the house, and was for a moment invisible. Then he entered the very room the hunter was watching, and sat down.

Five minutes passed. Then the inner door opened and two persons entered the room. One was Lona Mulligan; the second was Rose's cook, a brawny negress. The latter pushed the girl inside and then retired, leaving Lona and Rose together.

Rose immediately gained his feet and advanced with extended hand, as though he would warmly greet his unwilling guest, but Lona retreated behind a chair, and he relinquished his idea with a surly frown. He motioned her to a seat, and then sat down himself.

Girdley watched all, but this was not what he had come to see. It was the peril of Isabel Gray, not Lona, that had drawn him to the valley. He wondered where the teacher was. Was she in the house, or was his theory incorrect—had she been taken elsewhere?

Even while he asked himself these questions he closely watched all that was transpiring before him. He saw that an animated, but by no means friendly, conversation was being held by Rose and Lona. The chief clearly tried to act the role of a lover, but was met with keen sarcasm and unconcealed contempt: something his wild and lawless nature had not been called upon to endure for many a day.

Girdley became disturbed and uneasy. He saw by the outlaw's manner that Lona was in great danger, and he wondered why she would persist in angering him. If she thought of danger, however, she disregarded it, and he was soon in a towering passion.

"She is mad—mad!" muttered Girdley, in great anxiety, and it seemed that his head was cooler than hers, albeit it was touched with fever.

The crisis was at hand, and it came when Brick suddenly arose, strode across the room and seized Lona's arm. She raised her hand and struck him full in the face. The blow seemed to madden him. His broad hands closed over her neck, and a groan fell from Girdley's lips.

"Great heavens! he will strangle her!"

The thought fired the hunter's blood; he sprung forward, leaping through the window, and gained the outlaw's side. He had not thought to draw a weapon, but he had one furnished by Nature. He struck out heavily with his clinched hand, and Rose, dashed back, fell to the floor with a crash. The blow had opened a campaign which promised to prove decidedly warm, but no time had been given Girdley to deliberate before, nor even now. He turned to Lona quickly.

"Isabel!—where is she?" he demanded.

Lona had been startled and surprised, but she was not one to long lose her self-possession; she had seen wild scenes before that day.

"She is not here; St. Cyr took her away yesterday," she replied.

The question and reply were like two breaths between some stirring act, and more could not be said before Brick Rose came up like a dragon, his face dark with rage.

"So it's you!" he cried. "You—just the man I wanted to see. Ha! ha! ha! this is the happiest meeting of the year. Malediction, we'll hang you when the sun goes down. What, hol there!"

He had ceased exulting and raised his voice to call for help, but Girdley drew his knife and sprung toward him, resolved to have no scruples about winning victory as he could. Rose laughed loudly, however, and with a jerk drew a pistol and leveled it so suddenly that the hunter nearly ran upon the muzzle.

The latter saw his danger and ducked his head promptly, and as he did so a bullet sped over him, just missing, while the report almost stunned the adventurer.

He was up again in a moment, and he struck out with his knife straight at the outlaw, but Brick caught his wrist and the blow proved fruitless. Then the two grappled like tigers, reeling back against the wall in a fierce embrace, each fighting with all his energy. Girdley knew that his life depended on getting the advantage of the valley chief; the latter was anxious to win the revenge he believed due him because of his one-time patient's desertion.

Lona was no stranger to personal encounters and she did not lose her self-possession. She picked up Girdley's fallen knife and, going for-

ward, watched for a chance to put it in his hand.

Before she succeeded, however, the door hastily opened and the negress entered. She looked alarmed, and when she saw the scene before her she was not by any means calmed. On the contrary, she made use of woman's special privilege and began screaming at the top of her voice; then turned and fled.

Girdley knew that sound was his death-knell unless he could avert the danger by some prompt move.

He nerv'd himself for a great effort.

Dashing Rose back he struck him again to his feet, and, before he could fully recover, he had drawn his pistol and presented it to his head.

"Not a word, or a move, or I fire!" said the hunter, panting, but with an air of stern resolution.

Rose glared at him in silent hostility.

"Let us escape at once, or we are lost!" said Lona, looking after the fleeing negress.

Girdley was very much of the opinion that they were lost, any way, but he saw one ray of light in the darkness. He was in the lair of the lion, and had found his majesty at home; but might not the lion be used to keep off other carnivorous animals, rather than as a man-eater himself.

"Stand up, and obey me!" he said, sharply addressing the outlaw. "Listen to me: I am a desperate man, and will have no trifling. I command you to precede me and keep back all your men. Conduct me safely from the valley and you are saved; refuse, and I will shoot you where you stand. Miss Mulligan, follow. Brick Rose, lead on!"

The valley chief read the stern determination expressed in the hunter's words, voice and manner, and he knew his life depended on his obedience. Without a word he turned toward the door as Girdley ordered, and the retreat was begun.

It soon ended. As the outer door was opened it needed but one glance to show that all Rose's men were astir. The woman's cries had accomplished ample mischief, and with the outlaws buzzing about like bees the last avenue of escape seemed closed.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOTSPUR HUGH.

GIRDLEY took one good look through the valley, and then the conviction came to him that he could never take Brick Rose and Lona both through the danger which menaced them. Rose had temporarily yielded, but there was a sullen, untamable gleam in his eyes which told that he was far from being subdued, and the hunter caught at the only other way open to them.

Springing back he closed the door with a slam and threw the heavy iron bar into place.

"Lead the way up-stairs!" he then ordered, his pistol still threatening the valley chief.

Rose hesitated perceptibly.

"Mark me well," said the hunter, in a ringing voice; "I know it is death to me if you gain the upper hand again. Therefore, I swear it is death to you to refuse obedience now. Go up, or I fire!"

Not a word spoke Brick Rose, but he turned and went steadily up the stairs. His manner was as cool as though all was going to suit him, but his lips were compressed like the jaws of a vise. If he once managed to turn the tables he would be as merciless as a veritable lion.

Girdley, however, had the nerve to make the most of their small chance, and all his powers came to the front. When they gained the second floor he touched Rose on the arm.

"Your men are coming this way, pell-mell, and, unless checked, they will soon be in. I do not mean they shall enter. You must keep them back. Go to the window at once and repeat the words I ask you to speak."

"Beware!" said Brick, hoarsely. "Don't force me too far."

"It's your life or mine, and I don't back an inch!" the hunter declared. "Woman-stealer and whisky-maker, you deserve no gentle treatment. Take your choice—will you talk or chew lead?"

It was an inexorable voice, as Brick easily saw, and he decided not to tempt fate. He walked to the window, followed by his master. His men were hurrying toward the house, but they were quickly brought to a halt. With a pistol at his head Rose repeated what Girdley dictated:

"Halt, men! Come no nearer. Keep back!"

It was an unexpected order, for they were convinced from what the negress said that their leader needed prompt aid, but his will was their law, and they came to a reluctant and perplexed halt.

Girdley saw this, and the firmness of his voice increased as he dictated the next speech.

"I see you are coming here, men, because you think I am in trouble. Well, I was in trouble, but you can't help me. It is best for me that you keep away. Do you hear and understand?"

Brick delivered this address to his men, and then one of them constituted himself spokesman.

"We hear, captain, but we don't understand. Lona, the cook, said there was a stranger in the house, and that you two were fighting. Where is the stranger? He must not get away and betray us!"

"Tell him you have overpowered 'the stranger,'" said Girdley. "Say that he is a man you know, and that you want to talk with him before you let the men at him."

Rose ungraciously repeated the words.

"Better let a few of us come in," urged the man outside.

"Refuse the request and tell the men to return to their quarters," dictated Girdley.

Rose hesitated, but the pistol was again pressed against his head and he sullenly obeyed.

The order was obeyed by his men with equal sullenness. Knowing how much depended on keeping the secret of the valley from outsiders, they were suspicious of every chance that might betray them; and now that such a chance seemed visible they were reluctant to obey their leader's command. Yet, obey they did; at least so far as retiring from the front of the house was concerned; and Girdley knew he had obtained a temporary respite. What would be the end he did not know, but the exciting scene through which he had passed had served to clear his head and he felt that Richard was himself again.

Lona, too, was strangely calm, and she looked at her champion with admiration.

"Now, Captain Rose," said Girdley, turning to his companion, "we want a little plain talk. I am here to rescue this lady."

"The fires of perdition will scorch you before you get her away!" fiercely replied the valley chief.

"Perhaps. Further than this, I have no spite against your band. You doctored me when I was sick, and though you roped me into a mean business by lying, I'll call it square if you will. I am not here to harm you or your band. One thing, however, I shall insist upon. Luck has made you my prisoner, and I shall use you to help me get Miss Mulligan safely away. During the day you must keep your men at a distance. When night arrives, you must guide us both from the valley."

"Never!" shouted Rose.

"Sir, if you refuse I'll shoot you!"

It was an inexorable voice, as Brick Rose easily saw, and he concluded not to dispute any further just then. Under Girdley's directions, Lona found cords and bound the chief's hands behind his back, showing a skill which was surprising and pleasing. Rose was thus rendered helpless.

The work was not done any too soon. The hunter continued watchful, and he was soon startled at seeing Jake Mulligan approaching the house. As soon as possible Rose was got to the window, where his ally would see him, and once more the pistol made him speak as ordered:

"Ho, Mulligan! Halt where you are!"

The whisky-trader came to a surprised standstill.

"Wal, what is it?" he asked.

"I want you to keep back. I want to be alone. Leave me for awhile, and I'll see you anon."

"What ther blazes do yer mean?" Mulligan asked, in amazement.

"Simply that I want to be alone. Let me have my way, Jake, and it'll be all right."

"It's all right: now, h'thunder!" said the whisky-trader, loudly. "What crotchet bev you got inter yer head? Me stay out! Wal, I guess not. I'm comin' in; I be!"

So saying the man strode forward, and Lona touched Girdley on the arm. Her face was troubled.

"It is useless to try to keep him out," she said. "He is Brick Rose's superior; his employer; and he will enter, anyway."

"Yes," added Rose, with a grin, "and I reckon your little game is about played."

"We will see," said the hunter, his eyes flashing. "Lona, take one of these pistols and hold it at Brick's head. I am going below to admit Mr. Jake Mulligan."

"You—you will not kill him!" faltered Lona, who could not forget that the man was her father.

"No. If he is sensible, be need not be harmed."

The hunter went down the stairs, leaving Rose and Lona looking at each other fixedly.

"Girl, you are preparing for the wrath to come," he said, in a deep voice.

"Do not talk to me. Have I not seen enough of your methods? There can be nothing worse."

Brick did not answer, but stood gnawing at his mustache savagely. Both listened to sounds dimly heard from below, but they could tell nothing definite until footsteps on the stairs were followed by the appearance of Jake Mulligan and Girdley. The latter was driving the former at the muzzle of his pistol.

"Here is your friend, Mr. Rose," said the

hunter, coolly. "What have you to say to him?"

Mulligan was an astonished and an angry man. He stood in utter silence, but his eyes were busy. He rolled them from Rose to Lona, from Rose to Girdley, and then back to Rose. Twice he opened his mouth without speaking, and then he burst forth fiercely.

"What the fiends does it mean?"

"It means you have come in here as you insisted on doing, but that in coming in you have got into trouble. Rose is no longer king here; he is a captive. So are you, Mulligan. You didn't know enough to keep out when warned; now chew the morsel you covet. You are my prisoner!"

The whisky-trader could not at once recover his self-possession. He was surprised, chagrined and angry, but he also saw that he was helpless. Girdley had the advantage, and he knew by his manner that he would keep it. And then Mr. Mulligan relieved his feelings in language more emphatic and profane than polite.

But he was in the toils, and, despite all he could say or do, he was served exactly as Rose had been; his hands were bound behind him and he was a prisoner in the midst of his own camp.

How long such a state of affairs would continue the hunter did not know; it was not likely he could bind the whole band thus; but his success thus far gave him fresh courage and he was in a more cheerful mood than he had been for several days.

Lona, too, showed remarkable coolness and resolution; she never faltered in her share of the work.

Yet, neither was blind to the facts of the case. They were in the midst of their enemies, and the chances were very much against their getting out. They had entered the lair and bound the lion, but the whelps were all about and little less dangerous than his majesty.

Lona watched the prisoners, and the hunter watched the outside of the house. Rose's men kept at a respectful distance, but some of them were constantly in sight. It was clear that they were not entirely at ease concerning the state of affairs, as they knew it.

Girdley thought that he was watching well, and he was very much surprised when, on one of his rounds, he heard his name pronounced. He wheeled and saw an intruder in the room. He flung up his pistol quickly, and then lowered it again.

The new-comer was Hotspur Hugh.

"Be calm, brother," said the young Indian, steadily.

"You here?"

"As you see, Boston."

"Where did you come from?"

"Hoolah! Where, except from the hills? I crept past the whisky-makers and into the house."

"It seems impossible, yet—yet you are here," said the hunter. "Boy, are you a phantom that you could thus run the gauntlet?"

"They call me the Will-o'-the-Wisp," answered Hugh, "but I am of the flesh like you, Boston. If I am more skillful than some, it is because of the blood in my veins. I am an Indian, and my name is Striking Eagle."

"Your skill is striking, at any rate. But wait! Can you take Mulligan's girl and myself through the way you came?"

"Not even you, Boston. White men cannot creep like red-men. Even if you could leave the house, what would it benefit you? The way from the valley is guarded by men of the whisky-maker's band. There is only one other way to go. Can you climb a tree seventy feet high and as smooth as a papoose's face?"

"Perhaps not; perhaps yes, if my life depended on it. But Lona cannot go thus. Have we no long, strong ropes?"

"None."

Girdley was silent for a moment; then he suddenly aroused.

"You come from the outer world. What is the news there? Who is alive, and who is dead?"

Hotspur briefly sketched the scenes which had occurred since the hunter left the Mission, and the latter then learned for the first time that the fight at that place had not ended as he feared. He learned that the Molacks were the only ones who had finally gathered for the fight; that they had fought without Naika, who was strangely missing, and that they were now back to their village minus several of their best men, deprived of their chief, and alarmed lest they should be called upon to expiate their offense. The uprising had been a failure, and the Molacks, fooled as other red-men had before been by the whites, were now sorry they had taken any part in it.

Bloodrod and the American trappers, however, knew who the real offenders were, and they were not disposed to see them shift their sins upon the Indians. Believing that both Lona and Isabel were held captive by Brick Rose, the trappers had marched to the secret valley, guided by Hotspur.

They were even then all about the place. The valley was surrounded. Almost every tree was

the ambush of one of Bloodrod's men, and they were resolved to give the valley chief a lesson he would not soon forget.

Hotspur had entered the valley as a spy, and had made his way with great labor to the house, unseen by any of the "whisky-makers," as he called them.

All this the Will-o'-the-Wisp explained, and Girdley's spirits arose. He was in a close corner, but friends were at hand and he hoped to get out. He was the more in earnest because he hoped to establish his reputation with Bloodrod. The latter had trusted him when all seemed against him; if he could save Lona it would go far with the spy. Girdley had read that man's feelings toward the girl.

That the outlaws could long be kept away from the house seemed impossible, and it was agreed that Hugh should at once return to Bloodrod, make his report and hasten operations against the common enemy.

Hotspur went, and the hunter, watching him, was filled with admiration for the silent, serpentine way in which he left the valley. He seemed to go under the very eyes of the watching men, yet he made use of bush, rock and tree in such a way that he remained unseen.

"It is wonderful!" Girdley muttered, as the Indian finally disappeared. "With such an ally we may well have hope—yet, he is not yet out of the valley."

Thoughtfully the hunter walked to the front of the house. There he had a disagreeable surprise. Six of Rose's men were approaching, and their drawn weapons and resolute air told that they had formed a resolution and meant to carry it through.

What the resolution was, Girdley suspected only too clearly.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE SWORD IS AGAIN DRAWN.

BLOODROD'S men were all around the valley. The spy had taken the lead with a determined band. Those who had sent him to Oregon had given him license to use the trappers as he thought best, and the men themselves were eager for the work. Between them and the Hudson Bay men there was an old feud, and they liked Brick Rose's men but little better.

When they approached the secret valley no one was sure Rose's command was there. True, the trail led in that direction, but Bloodrod suspected they might have visited it and then departed to other scenes.

Examination, however, showed that they were still there, and Bloodrod sent Hotspur Hugh to discover if the girls were inside, while he kept his men still concealed.

Hugh was yet absent when one of the trapper pickets came hastily to his chief with a report of importance. A band of men were approaching whom he believed to be St. Cyr and the Hudson Bay trappers.

This placed a new aspect on affairs. The combined force of St. Cyr and Rose outnumbered Bloodrod's, and a collision might prove disastrous to the latter.

Bloodrod was now forced to do some rapid planning. It would not be hard to avoid the notice of the new-comers, but he was desirous of preventing a union of the hostile forces. How could it be done? He thought quickly, and then arrived at a decision.

St. Cyr and his men marched on until near the valley, when they saw a stranger advance to meet them. He made friendly signs, at the same time composedly motioning to them to stop, and the direction was obeyed. The Frenchman had no suspicion that the man was not one of Brick Rose's followers.

The stranger had his story all ready. Rose was preparing to leave the valley, and he was arranging everything so that it would be warm work for whoever tried to enter after they were gone. Dangerously suspended rocks, pitfalls and other dangers menaced the at-all-times difficult way of the bluff; it had been made a series of man-traps, and Rose desired the Hudson Bay men to keep back.

As soon as his preparations for departure were made, he would be out and join his ally.

St. Cyr saw nothing suspicious in this message, and he brought his party to a halt, and all camped, unconscious of the fact that their enemies were so near.

The French leader talked for some time longer with the messenger, and then they separated, and the former turned back into camp. He glanced curiously at his hybrid companions. Jules Lemaire stood leaning against a tree, looking thoughtfully at vacancy, according to his usual fashion; Isabel Gray sat beside a log with her face concealed in her hands, weary and disheartened; and Obed Leechcomb chatted serenely with the trappers.

The agent had recovered from his fright, and a generous application of water had made him look better outwardly. He had new plans for the future. He was convinced that his career as an agent among the missions was blighted in its youth, and he had decided to no longer pretend to be a man of high moral character.

Despite his years he had taken a fancy to

the wild, free life of the Hudson Bay employees, and he was resolved to apply for a place as a partisan.

Hence he was already studying the peculiar life they led.

St. Cyr came to him as he sat by the fire.

"I have concluded to accept the offer you made me," he said, quietly.

"In regard to Isabel?"

"Certainly, mon ami. You have not made me any other, have you?"

"No. And you will give me the sum I mentioned for my secret?"

"Yes, if it prove as valuable as you say. You claim that if I give it to you, you will tell me how I can make ten times as much."

"And win a handsome wife besides."

"Exactly."

"So I said, and I told you no lie. Do you agree and promise to deal faithfully with me?"

"I swear it! You and I had some business in Montreal once, in which we were true to each other—though the fiend knows our game resulted poorly. Yes; I'll do the square thing, or else leave the job alone."

"Then it is a bargain. I am glad you mentioned that old affair at Montreal, for I want to speak of it now. You will remember that when I met you there I was the guardian of Isabel Dalton, or Isabel Gray, as she now calls herself."

"Yes."

"The girl was an heiress, made so under peculiar circumstances. The money was bequeathed her by an old lady who had made an early and unhappy marriage, only to live a miserable existence. She gave her money to Isabel on condition that she did not marry until she was twenty-one. Should she marry before that, the money was to go to the next of kin. I was left the girl's guardian, and it was also left for me to explain the terms of the will. I neglected to do so. I was acquainted with the next of kin, a girl named Mabel Long, and as I knew her to be a girl of enterprise, I resolved to marry Isabel off before she was twenty-one, and deliver the money to Mabel."

"When I met you in Montreal, I called in your help, and it was agreed that you should aid me all through, and marry Mabel as your reward. The latter agreed to the plan, and you remember what followed.

"Isabel had a lover named Neal Girdley, to whom she was engaged, but, for two reasons, he did not suit us. First, he was poor, and he was resolved—poor fool!—not to marry an heiress until he had as much as she. Secondly, he was too shrewd for our purpose. So I, as Isabel's guardian, stoutly opposed his suit.

"The man we did select for Isabel's husband was a Frenchman named Ernest Delorme. He, too, was conscientious to a certain degree, but he was romantic, warm-hearted, impulsive and very much in love with Isabel. So we decided that he would do. What was the result? We plotted and schemed, but Isabel continued to love Girdley in spite of all. She disliked Delorme, but, though we made a fool of him and fairly drove him on, she would not transfer her affections.

"Finally, we played our trump card; risking all on the cast of a die, we went in to win or lose. I opposed Girdley more earnestly than ever, and then the climax came. We had hired a girl of low social rank—somebody's servant, I believe—whose name was Lona Mulligan, to spy upon the lovers, and one day she came to us and reported that they had planned to elope. Well, they did elope, didn't they, St. Cyr?"

The old villain facetiously poked his companion in the ribs and they laughed together. Leechcomb seemed to take the utmost pleasure in recalling these old occurrences, while St. Cyr, who had at first listened impatiently, had resigned himself to the narrative and, lying nearly flat on the ground, smoked and listened calmly.

Had he looked behind him he might not have been quite so much at his ease.

What was there visible might have disturbed him.

Jules Lemaire had silently approached and, standing by a tree, was listening to every word that Leechcomb spoke. He seemed aroused from his usual thoughtful air, and, with eager attention, followed each phase of the story.

Yet, this attention would not have pleased St. Cyr; there were things connected with this old story which he did not desire should be spread abroad.

"Having been thus warned by our female spy—Miss Mulligan, I mean—our way was quite clear," Leechcomb resumed, "and we played our cards rapidly. Going to Delorme, you made a fool of him still further. You convinced him that Isabel was really in love with him, but that she kept back that love because she feared me. Then you gave him a letter supposed to be written by Isabel, in which she spoke of an immediate marriage, and agreed to meet him at a certain church at a certain time.

"Delorme kept the appointment, and so did Isabel, for it was the place where she was to meet Girdley. And what of the latter? Well, Lona Mulligan came conveniently there. We

hired her to elope with Girdley, and as she went in a close carriage and be on horseback, they actually journeyed to still another church before he discovered the cheat. He learned it at the altar, and, flying into a rage, forced the girl to confess that Delorme and Isabel had gone to church number one. The Mulligan girl, however, was plucky, and she gave Girdley to understand that Isabel had deceived him.

"Tis said he rushed from the church like mad, and, mounting his horse, rode in the same way to the other church to confront Isabel and Delorme, little knowing that you and I had fooled them as much as he was fooled. They had found it out by that time. We had tried to make their marriage a masked one, in the most approved romantic style, but Isabel discovered that the voice of the would-be groom was not Girdley's, and the whole affair went to pieces. Delorme, stung by her cutting—though unjust—words, rushed like a madman from the church, even as Girdley had rushed from the other one. Very romantic, eh? Ha! ha!"

"Delorme was either mad or a fool," said St. Cyr, curtly. "I went to him as he was mooning around in the grounds which surrounded the church, wringing his hands and lamenting with true French ardor, but he saw fit to take ill the consolation I would have given him. He accused me of having betrayed him, and, finally drew his sword to attack me."

"The more fool he!" said Leechcomb, laughing.

"Ay; the more fool he. We had crossed blades before, and he knew I was his master, yet he went at me then like a madman."

"What good did it do him?" mocked Obed.

"None," snapped St. Cyr. "I evaded his first rush, and then, drawing my own sword, made one lunge and speared him like a salmon."

"Ha! ha! You did it neatly, for no sound reached those inside the church, and you were out of sight before the curious villagers who had collected on account of the light in the church, beheld Girdley ride up in hot haste, dismount, and rush up the walk. When he was half-way he fell over something. Ha! ha! It was the body of Ernest Delorme, stone dead!"

"Enough," said St. Cyr, a little uneasily. "I killed him, but it need not be spread to the four winds. Speak of the other actors in the affair. We have had enough of Delorme."

He snapped his fingers as though to thus dismiss a trivial subject, but just then a hand fell heavily on his shoulder.

He turned and saw Jules Lemaire, sword in hand, and with a face so pale that the partisan was startled.

"We have not had enough of Ernest Delorme!" he said, in a husky voice. "I have a word to say; I, who am his brother. You have wondered why I would never cross swords with you in sport. It was because I, Jules Delorme, had sworn never to cross blades with any one until it could be with him who murdered my brother, Ernest. I have broken that pledge but once. Now, the moment for which I have longed is come; by your own confession you are the murderer of my brother. Years ago I swore to kill that man when I found him, and I now repeat my vow. Basil St. Cyr, draw your sword and defend your miserable life!"

And Lemaire smote the partisan full in the face with his open hand.

CHAPTER XL.

"BLACKER THAN THE DARKEST NIGHT!"

HAD a thunderbolt fallen beside Basil St. Cyr he could not have been more astonished. All through the vehement address he listened stupidly, and even when Lemaire, alias Delorme, struck him so hard that he staggered, he looked at him in bewilderment.

"You, his brother!" he muttered.

"Ay, and the brother who has sworn to avenge him. How strange is fate! For a year I have been your daily companion, never suspecting you were concerned in that fatal tragedy. But I have the truth at last; you have yourself said you killed Ernest Delorme, and now you shall either kill me or yield your own wretched life as an expiation. Draw, assassin, draw!"

Jules Delorme's voice rung out loud and clear. The whole camp was aroused; the men flocked forward, amazed and confused. They saw bloodshed impending, yet no one dared interfere. These two men were their leaders, and if they saw fit to fight it was not for the common trappers to binder.

They did see fit to fight. St. Cyr was stung to action at last, and, forgetting that Jules was his superior with the sword, even as he had been the superior of Ernest Delorme, he drew with a jerk and threw himself into position.

The swords crossed with a clang, and then those who stood by witnessed the most extraordinary fight they had ever seen. Delorme fought with terrible purpose; he gave blow after blow in quick succession, and the clash of steel sounded far and wide and frightened the birds from their resting-places in the branches; while St. Cyr was obliged to devote all his attention to defense, and succeeded but poorly at that.

Delorme drove him back relentlessly and a frightened look came to the partisan's face; back still, and then the insufficient guard was beaten down, Delorme's sword found a sheath in human flesh and St. Cyr reeled back and fell with a crash.

When Hotspur Hugh left the cabin in the valley he had no trouble in regaining the cliff. Some of the trappers had found a rope, and this was lowered to the young Indian with a noose in the end, to expedite his ascent.

He was drawn up, and when he had told Bloodrod the state of affairs in the valley, the latter resolved to delay no longer. Lona and Girdley were plainly in serious danger, and the sooner the valley was stormed, the better. Possibly the work could be done without alarming St. Cyr's followers.

The trappers were quickly united and, leaving only a small guard at the top—where Hotspur Hugh remained as a scout—the others promptly rushed upon and seized Rose's guard, and then moved down the valley.

This point reached, they formed and charged like a company of soldiers, their movements accelerated by the fact that a fight seemed to be going on at the chief's house.

So there was. Rose's men had come to the conclusion that something was wrong there and they had resolved to know what, and though, at Girdley's order, Rose once more told them to keep back, they made a rush and carried the house by storm, releasing Rose and Mulligan, and forcing Girdley back into a corner. He was defending himself against odds and would soon have been cut down, but the trappers arrived just in time and the outlaws were swept away like chaff.

Mulligan and Rose saw that all was lost, and they resolved to escape while they could. Unluckily for himself, the valley chief also resolved to take Lona. Seeing that he was stubborn, the whisky-trader reluctantly gave his aid, and, escaping from the house by the rear, the two ran up the valley, forcing Lona to go between them.

Bloodrod, however, did not forget "Mulligan's girl," and he soon discovered how she was being taken away. He ordered a pursuit; the fugitives were closely pressed; some trapper fired without warning, running great risk of hitting Lona, but dropped her father, instead; and Brick Rose found himself in most serious danger.

He was about to abandon Lona when he saw a rope dangling from a tree: the same with which the trappers had raised Hotspur Hugh. There he paused. The tree was close to the bluff. If he could gain its branches, the way of escape was open.

He looked back at the pursuers. They were close at hand; they must be attended to at once. If they could be frightened back, there was still hope for him.

So reasoned the outlaw, but he did not notice that in the tree, where the rope ended, a dark object lay stretched on a limb, looking down at him. Still, it was there, and in the lithe form and dusky face we recognize Hotspur Hugh.

Rose turned at bay with a pistol in each hand and sent two shots whizzing back.

It was a warning the trappers saw fit to heed. Rose was in a place where he was nearly concealed by huge boulders, and these so sheltered him that he had a temporary advantage over them. They sprung to the shelter of neighboring trees and waited for orders from Bloodrod, but the latter had seen something which caused him to wait a little.

Brick looked at Lona with blazing eyes.

"We'll sink or swim together," he said.

"It'll be sink, then," replied the girl, with a laugh like her old, reckless one.

"So be it. If I go down you shall be with me."

"Don't be so sure."

"Bab! I can hold them at bay here for a long time, and if they get at us, I'll kill you before they shall take you."

He looked keenly over the stone behind which he crouched. He would have done better had he looked up at the rope. Had he done so he would have seen a strange sight. Hotspur Hugh was descending. He moved in a fashion as eccentric as was his nature.

Before starting he had realized the importance of having a pistol where he could use it at a moment's warning if discovered, and his descent was planned accordingly. As he came down an observer would have seen that neither hand touched the rope; he had merely twisted it several times around one leg and was descending head first, allowing himself to wind and unwind exactly as a performer descends from a trapeze.

Thus, he was enabled to watch Rose closely, while his ready pistol could surely be discharged before the man below could fire. Steadily he came down, watching constantly, until he was only just above the crouching outlaw.

The crisis was at hand.

The desperado, watching for other foes, was unconscious that Hotspur Hugh was near, but he suddenly became aware of it as the youth made a light spring and alighted on his back.

The weight beat Rose down, and in a moment

more Hugh's whoop rung out clear and loud. Bloodrod had been anxiously watching, and as he saw that the scheme was a success, he gave the word and the trappers rushed in.

Brick Rose was unsubdued, however, and a desperate fight ensued. When it ended Rose lay lifeless among the boulders.

There was peace at last. With the whisky-makers whipped, the American trappers turned upon the Hudson Bay men. Another fight seemed sure to follow, but to the surprise of the "Bostons" it proved otherwise. A white flag was shown and Jules Lemaire Delorme appeared. He had no hatred for the American trappers, and he came to say that he wished to restore a young lady—Miss Gray, by name—to her friends, and to have them hear the dying statement of one Basil St. Cyr.

The Hudson Bay men would much rather have fought, even against odds, but Jules was their leader now St. Cyr was dying, and they obeyed his order. They withdrew to a respectful distance, while in one group near the American camp were Delorme, St. Cyr, Leechcomb, Bloodrod, Girdley, Hotspur Hugh, Isabel and Lona.

Obed Leechcomb was a badly frightened man, and as he saw Girdley and Isabel standing side by side, he came to them to make his peace.

There was much for him to confess, and he told over the tricks and lies he had used to separate them in the old days; adding that Mabel Long, who had been the next of kin after Isabel to the money which had made all this trouble, had tricked him and St. Cyr at the end. When Isabel fled from Montreal the plotters forged proof of her death and Mabel won the fortune, but she then laughed at her old allies, married another man than St. Cyr and left them out in the cold.

At last, however, she was dead, and there was no one to dispute Isabel's claim to the money if she appeared to claim it. All this Leechcomb explained with a kindness born of fear, and though they said little, there was that in their eyes which told that they were at peace at last.

And Lona Mulligan came forward to beg their pardon, with tear-filled eyes, for her share in that old drama; the only deed of her life of which she need be really ashamed; and they not only forgave her, but Isabel sealed the treaty with a kiss.

But every one grew bushed and silent as Basil St. Cyr aroused from a brief stupor.

"I didn't know it was so near night," he muttered.

"It is not night," said Bloodrod, gently.

"But it's growing dark."

"It is the darkness of death, St. Cyr."

The partisan shivered.

"Bring in the lights!" he ordered, with feeble energy, "and replenish the fire. It is cold and dark. How gloomy it is. It is blacker than the darkest night."

They were the last coherent words he spoke. In five minutes all was over, and to him had come a night which would never end on earth.

In the secret valley Jake Mulligan and Brick Rose were buried; on the bluff, Basil St. Cyr found a last resting-place.

Jules Delorme led the Hudson Bay trappers back to British soil, but, once there, he left the brigade and returned to France. Nothing further is known of him.

Obed Leechcomb, thoroughly frightened, helped to recover Isabel's money and then set out for Europe. The vessel on which he sailed was never again heard of.

Rufus Just rebuilt the New England Mission, and was never again molested. He did wonderful things among the Indians, and even affected Whisky John so that the old fellow was sober nearly half the time. The Molacks never again molested their white neighbors; indeed, they were too feeble for fighting after the destruction at the Mission.

Blue Jay, alias Nellie, grew up to be Mr. Just's bright example of what civilization could do for the Indians.

Hotspur Hugh, however, remained untamable, and he soon wandered away from his old home. Rumor said that he went to the land of the Blackfeet and became a chief among them, but there is no proof of this. Be that as it may, he will long be remembered with gratitude by the chief characters of our story.

We need scarcely say that Isabel became Mrs. Neal Girdley, or that Bloodrod made the most of the rough jewel he found in the Columbia woods and married Lona. Fortunately, we are able to add that good fortune smiled upon the two couples, and that now, after the lapse of many years, and with the Columbia a far different country than in the old days, they look back without regret to the time when they lived in wild Oregon.

None of the quartette have been back there, however, since the days of Hotspur Hugh and the Banded Brothers of the Giant's Arm.

THE END.

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